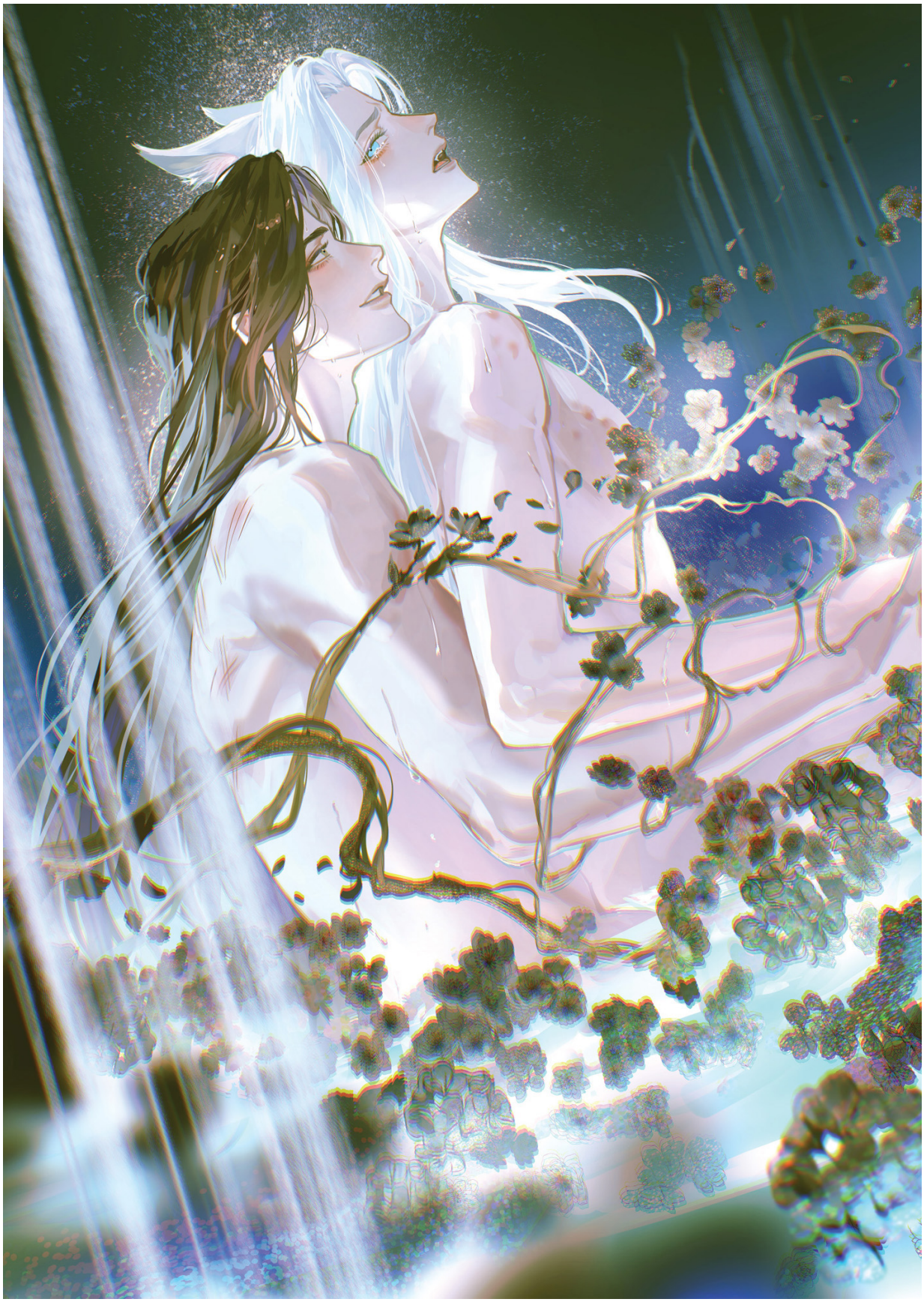
Lv Ye Qian He
The White Cat's Divine Scratching Post
2

Table of Contents

Color Gallery
Title Page
Copyrights and Credits
Table of Contents Page
Chapter 45: Divine Artifact
Chapter 46: Counterfeit
Chapter 47: Inner Demons
Chapter 48: Core Formation
Chapter 49: Hogslayer
Chapter 50: Taishi
Chapter 51: Sectbound
Chapter 52: Ninesouls
Chapter 53: Discipleship
Chapter 54: The Way Of The Elixirist
Chapter 55: Misunderstanding
Chapter 56: Secret Arts
Chapter 57: Candidate
Chapter 58: Provocation
Chapter 59: Breeding
Chapter 60: Tiger Penis
Chapter 61: Bath
Chapter 62: Fox
Chapter 63: Treasure Tree
Chapter 64: Mountain Path
Chapter 65: Love Pledge
Chapter 66: Legacy
Chapter 67: Grand Summit
Chapter 68: Competition
Chapter 69: Cat House
Chapter 70: Champion
Chapter 71: Access Token
Chapter 72: Overt Conspiracy
Chapter 73: Severed Hand
Chapter 74: Dual Cultivation

Chapter 75: Kiss And Make Up
Chapter 76: After The Deed
Chapter 77: Hunting
Chapter 78: Healing
Chapter 79: Visitors
Chapter 80: Trouble
Chapter 81: Returning to the Sect
Chapter 82: Meal Bell
Chapter 83: Wolf Pup
Chapter 84: Disciple Swap
Chapter 85: Rocking Horse
Chapter 86: Bloom
The Story Continues
Character Guide & Glossary
About the Author
Footnotes
Back Cover
Newsletter

The White Cat's Divine Scratching Post
NOVEL
2



The White Cat's Divine Scratching Post

NOVEL

2

WRITTEN BY

Lv Ye Qian He

TRANSLATION BY

raccoon

ILLUSTRATIONS BY

Bakuten

Seven Seas Entertainment

THE WHITE CAT'S DIVINE SCRATCHING POST (NOVEL) VOL. 2

Published originally under the title of《神木挠不尽》
(The White Cat's Divine Scratching Post)
Copyright © 绿野千鹤 （Lv Ye Qian He）
English edition rights under license granted by 北京晋江原创网络科技有限公司
(Beijing Jinjiang Original Network Technology Co., Ltd.)
English edition copyright ©2025 by Seven Seas Entertainment, Inc.
English edition arranged through JS Agency Co., Ltd.
All rights reserved.

Illustrations by Bakuten

No portion of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form without written permission from the copyright holders. This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental. Any information or opinions expressed by the creators of this book belong to those individual creators and do not necessarily reflect the views of Seven Seas Entertainment or its employees.

Seven Seas press and purchase enquiries can be sent to Marketing Manager Lauren Hill at press@gomanga.com. Information regarding the distribution and purchase of digital editions is available from Digital Operations Manager CK Russell at digital@gomanga.com.

Seven Seas and the Seven Seas logo are trademarks of Seven Seas Entertainment. All rights reserved.

Follow Seven Seas Entertainment online at sevenseasentertainment.com.

TRANSLATION: raccoon
ADAPTATION: Leah Masterson
LOGO DESIGN: Ryan Lewis
COVER DESIGN: Mariel Dágá
INTERIOR DESIGN: M. A. Lewife
INTERIOR LAYOUT: Tanya Sokolovskaya
COPY EDITOR: Ami Leh
PROOFREADER: Jack Hamm, Winter Greene
QUALITY CONTROL: Meg van Huygen
EDITOR: Harry Catlin
PREPRESS TECHNICIAN: April Malig, Jules Valera
PREPRESS MANAGER: Rafer Roberts
PRODUCTION MANAGER: Clay Gardner
MANAGING EDITOR: Alyssa Scavetta
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: Julie Davis
PUBLISHER: Lianne Sentar
VICE PRESIDENT: Adam Arnold
PRESIDENT: Jason DeAngelis

ISBN: 979-8-89561-119-7
Printed in Canada
First Printing: April 2026
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

晋江文学城
WWW.JJWXC.NET

CONTENTS

45 Divine Artifact
46 Counterfeit
47 Inner Demons
48 Core Formation
49 Hogslayer
50 Taishi
51 Sectbound
52 Ninesouls
53 Discipleship
54 The Way Of The Elixirist
55 Misunderstanding
56 Secret Arts
57 Candidate
58 Provocation
59 Breeding
60 Tiger Penis
61 Bath
62 Fox
63 Treasure Tree
64 Mountain Path
65 Love Pledge
66 Legacy

67 Grand Summit
68 Competition
69 Cat House
70 Champion
71 Access Token
72 Overt Conspiracy
73 Severed Hand
74 Dual Cultivation
75 Kiss And Make Up
76 After The Deed
77 Hunting
78 Healing
79 Visitors
80 Trouble
81 Returning to the Sect
82 Meal Bell
83 Wolf Pup
84 Disciple Swap
85 Rocking Horse
86 Bloom
Character Guide
Glossary

Chapter 45:
Divine Artifact

IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT, someone triggered the protective barrier around their room. Mo Tianliao's eyes snapped open. The intruder, realizing he'd activated the ward, quickly left without a word, so Mo Tianliao assumed it must have been one of the night patrol guards.

He turned to look at His Feline Lordship, who was lying on his side facing him, his slender body slightly curled. His beautiful eyes were closed peacefully, and he showed no signs of waking up.

Thanks to the snowy mountain that stood nearby, nights in Bahuang City were fairly cool, and Mo Tianliao gently tucked the blanket around his master. Qingtong instinctively shifted closer at his touch, nestling his head against Mo Tianliao's shoulder and resting his slender hand on Mo Tianliao's chest, his fingers hooking into his collar as he slumbered on.

This was a spirit cultivator at the soul transformation stage, whose cultivation and hearing both far surpassed Mo Tianliao's, and yet here he was, sleeping so deeply and soundly. Was it because he was sleeping beside him? Mo Tianliao couldn't stop himself from smiling at the thought. Slowly, he leaned over to examine that incomparably handsome face under the moonlight, pressing a kiss to his soft, silky hair.

Sweet dreams. Even if the sky falls, I'll be here.

The next day, when Mo Tianliao opened his eyes, the gorgeous man beside him was gone, but there was a slight lump under the blanket at his chest. Mo Tianliao lifted it to find a snow-white ball of fur sleeping there cozily. One paw was even reaching inside his inner garment.

Shizun, does this count as taking liberties with your disciple? Mo Tianliao quirked a smile and scratched the cat on the head.

Qingtong gave a little mew and began to purr. Pushing up against those wayward fingers, the cat yawned and slowly opened his eyes. Those orbs like light-colored glass appeared even more crystalline and clear in the

morning light. He stood up and stretched elegantly, then strolled closer and very formally placed a paw on Mo Tianliao's chin.

The morning was so cozy Mo Tianliao was tempted to stay in bed. He reached out to stroke the cat's fur, only to receive a slap for his trouble.

Insolent disciple, wake up! Are we still buying that trash or not?

They left the room to see if Lord Shidi had returned, and they learned that he had come back last night and was already waiting for Mo Tianliao in the front hall. Surprised and curious, Mo Tianliao went to the front hall and glanced at Shidi with interest. Maybe Shidi was actually the one who couldn't get it up?

"The fox was on the brink of death last night, and Nightmare insisted on coming back," Shidi explained as soon as he saw Mo Tianliao. He sounded suspiciously defensive.

Mo Tianliao responded with a knowing look: *I get it, no need to explain further.*

Shidi was so furious that he yanked at the mane of the lion at his feet. The lion snapped his head around and roared at him in displeasure. *Sure, keep blaming ME!*

Even by the time they'd arrived at the auction house in Bahuang City, the demon lord and his lion were still arguing telepathically.

Bahuang City sat in a basin surrounded by mountains on all sides. The auction house, located in the city center, was an underground venue accessed via a descending spiral staircase that was covered in a scarlet carpet from beginning to end. Bright sunstones embedded in the walls illuminated the way. The interior was dark, however, making it hard to get a clear look inside.

When they saw Shidi, the attendants led him to his private room without another word. Hierarchy was everything for those on the demonic path. In a large auction house like the one in Bahuang, each demon lord had their own private room. The one in the center belonged to the highest-ranked demon lord; Shidi's own was located further down. As they made their way over, Mo Tianliao pulled up his hood to cover his face and glanced over nonchalantly.

The room of the number one demon lord of the demonic path was the largest, and the entrance was decorated in shades of green with the character “Ming,” meaning sea, written above. The next room was decorated with bright red and labeled “Xiang,” meaning flight. Mo Tianliao’s brow furrowed slightly. This second room had once borne the character “Duan,” meaning to forge, and it had been his.

Mo Tianliao had previously had the dual attributes of earth and fire, and his strength compared to the various demon lords had only been average, but because of his endless supply of spiritual treasures and magical artifacts—and because everyone needed his help—his position had always been second regardless of the situation. Now, someone else had taken his spot, but he didn’t know who this Xiang was; he’d never even heard of any demon lord by that name…

He suddenly recalled the eagle emblem he’d seen in the Information Repository. Could it be connected?

Shidi stopped abruptly when he noticed the lights were on in the highest-ranked demon lord’s room. “Is Lord Mingyan here today?”

“Yes,” the attendant answered respectfully.

“The rest of you go on ahead. I have to greet the chief.” Shidi waved his maidservants and guards on and turned to Mo Tianliao. “My dear nephew, would you like to come with me to meet your Uncle Ming?”

The corners of Mo Tianliao’s mouth twitched, concealed under the shadows of the hood. “I appreciate your kindness, but my cultivation is still lacking, and I fear the Venerable Lord would feel offended if you were to introduce me out of the blue.”

Mingyan had already been the highest-ranked demon lord when Mo Tianliao had first made his name. The real extent of his powers was impossible to determine. Everyone said he had reached the heavenly tribulation stage long ago but couldn’t ascend because he couldn’t conquer his inner demons. Mo Tianliao had barely interacted with him in his previous life, but if this half-immortal at the tribulation stage happened to notice anything amiss, it could become a big problem for him.

But Shidi had merely suggested it as a formality. He didn’t intend to introduce this artificer who could complete divine artifacts to anyone else.

If Mingyan tried to poach Mo Tianliao, after all, he'd be powerless to stop him.

Shidi's private room was designed in the same style as his demon palace—ostensibly elegant but ostentatiously opulent.

There was a large cushion on the floor, and Nightmare pounced and rolled on it as soon as he entered the room. The white cat poked his head out of Mo Tianliao's collar and started squirming to get down too.

Mo Tianliao looked around. The room was heavily warded and quite secure. The maidservants from the demon palace weren't a threat, since they were only at the qi-refining stage; the guards, who were stronger, were all stationed outside. Slightly reassured, Mo Tianliao took the cat out and let him play.

The cat leaped from Mo Tianliao's hands to land right on top of the lion's head, where he plunged into the thick mane that still carried the stench of blood. He sniffed carefully, memorizing the white fox's scent.

The lion craned his neck back to look at the cat, trying so hard he ended up turning around in three tight circles, chasing his tail, but he didn't manage to catch a glimpse. The cat finally jumped down and rolled on the cushion. Excited, the lion pounced, only to receive a swat on the nose that sent him tumbling to the other side of the cushion.

Shidi returned to find Mo Tianliao lounging to one side and sipping tea, his cat sitting obediently on the cushion licking his paw, and his own silly lion lying on his back with his belly exposed. Meanwhile, his beautiful, graceful maids were awkwardly gawking at the sight, their mouths agape, as if they'd just seen something unbelievable.

The demonic path auctions weren't as conservative as the orthodox auctions, as they had no qualms about selling basically anything: pretty vessels, rare techniques, spirit beasts obtained through questionable means, elixirs with peculiar uses, insidious spiritual artifacts—everything was up for grabs. Hypocrites from the orthodox sects also frequented these auctions for objects they couldn't openly buy.

The auctioneers were a male and female duo—one eloquent and the other attractive—working together to liven up the atmosphere.

“The ninth treasure is the dream of every male cultivator,” the female auctioneer said with a suggestive smile as she took out a white jade bottle. “Heaven-grade Nectar of Intimacy. Gentlemen, don’t miss this if your cultivation partner is male.” She then pulled out the stopper, dipped in a jade slip the size of a chopstick, and lifted it, showing off the crystal-clear liquid that gave off a faint fragrance. The Nectar of Intimacy was an assistive elixir needed for dual cultivation between two male cultivators. The natural law of the universe that followed the principle of yin and yang favored a male-female pair when it came to dual cultivation, but the path of cultivation was long and never-ending, and there were always some who would take the road less traveled. Ointments of this sort were developed to make it easier for men to dual cultivate. This was why the procuress of the Carefree Pavilion recommended male vessels as well as female ones.

The heaven-grade Nectar of Intimacy was said to be made with thousand-year-old spiritual herbs, and using it was not only harmless to one’s cultivation partner but would also stop the backflow of spiritual energy that could occur due to a disparity in cultivation levels, preventing one’s dual cultivation partner from being reduced to a mere cultivation vessel.

Shidi took a sip of spiritual wine and clicked his tongue as he watched the bidding frenzy below. “There are quite a number of people like your father these days.”

Mo Tianliao raised an eyebrow. What did this have to do with him?

“Your father didn’t like women,” Shidi added, shaking his head.

Mo Tianliao choked on his tea. People who’d sent him women in his previous life had also sent him pretty young men when they’d seen him send those women to tend furnaces, but he’d always sent those men away to forge iron, too, hadn’t he? Where in the world did this fool get the idea that he liked men? But then, the image materialized in his mind of the peerlessly handsome face he’d seen bathed in moonlight last night—along with those slender fingers grasping his collar—and he suddenly felt a little sheepish.

He instinctively glanced at his master. The white cat was pouncing around on the head of the lion, who was lying obediently on the cushion to let the cat play.

There were eighteen bottles of heaven-grade Nectar of Intimacy, which went up for auction individually. Once the bidding was over, an attendant entered with a tray and set down a bottle of the nectar.

The lion looked up incredulously at his master.

Shidi moved his hand away from the bidding crystal, picked up the jade bottle, and tossed it to Mo Tianliao. “It’s the anniversary of your father’s death in a few days. Please burn this for him as an offering on my behalf.”

Mo Tianliao caught the bottle, but it was some time before he managed to reply. Gritting his teeth, he forced out the words, “Then I shall thank you on behalf of my father.”

Shidi waved away his thanks.

The prices of the items for auction grew increasingly higher, with several spirit beasts fetching sky-high rates. Soul beasts who had signed blood pacts would beget offspring influenced by those pacts, which meant they could only be used by those related by blood to the original owner. These beasts could not form pacts with anyone but the original owner’s kin, which was also why ownerless spirit beasts were becoming so scarce. Places like the Carefree Auction House had to have people dedicated to raising and breeding ownerless spirit beasts behind the scenes to sell.

“And now for our final treasure.” The two auctioneers grew solemn. “By a fortunate coincidence, three hundred years ago, Lord Duantian, the master artificer of the demonic path, forged a magical treasure that could bring about an astronomical phenomenon. This treasure, unseen since the great ancient war between the gods and demons, far surpasses all celestial artifacts in existence today. Behold, the divine treasure!”

“The ‘final treasure’?” Over in a private room with “Ming” inscribed on the door sat a man in a green wide-sleeved robe. He held his cup in a hand with well-defined knuckles, swirling the amber-colored wine within.

“Uh, that evolved spirit cultivator e-escaped last night.” The manager of Carefree Auction House stood off to the side in a bow, not even daring to raise his head.

“Where did he escape to?” The killing intent in that frosty voice was so blatant it was almost tangible.

The manager didn’t dare to hide the truth. “T-to the Carefree Pavilion, where Lord Shidi stole him away,” he said hurriedly.

Silence descended upon the auction house as everyone waited with bated breath for the divine artifact that had caused countless casualties among the orthodox and unorthodox paths. Legend had it that the bloodbath had drenched Annihilation Valley in blood, and even now, the rocks of Mount Yanhuo were still stained red. Three demon lords had perished, and several demonic sects had suffered heavy losses. The balance of power in the orthodox sects had been seriously affected, too.

“Divine artifacts are the weapons of the ancient gods, said to be capable of shaking the earth with one move,” the auctioneer said with dramatic flair. “Back then, Annihilation Valley was a superior-grade celestial artifact in itself. So, you can imagine the destructive power of a divine artifact that far surpasses a celestial artifact—it could even destroy the world!”

The white cat leaped onto Mo Tianliao’s lap and made eye contact with him. Mo Tianliao cleared his throat and tucked the cat into his robe.

Someone on stage carried out an ornate blade stand, sculpted from exorbitantly priced deep sea aquamarine into a magnificent sculpture of the mythical great peng spreading its wings. The top of the stand was covered with a piece of dark blue brocade made from highland snow velvet.

Shidi’s grip tightened on the armrests by his sides; he still hadn’t seen the true form of this divine artifact.

“Watch carefully, ladies and gentlemen!” The two auctioneers each pulled at a corner of the brocade, which glided off like a cascading mountain waterfall.

“Wow—” The audience were gasping before they even got a clear look, but once the divine artifact was finally unveiled, the whole venue fell silent.

On the stand rested a glinting, foot-long, polished, pitch-black… butcher knife!

MINI EXTRA

Big Hammer: This is a divine artifact? Are you kidding me?

Woodworker: What’s wrong?

Big Hammer: How is the divine artifact a butcher knife?!

Woodworker: Well, if you find it hard to accept, you can think of it as a meat cleaver.

Big Hammer: *speechless*

Chapter 46:
Counterfeit

CRACK! LORD SHIDI BROKE the armrests. Slowly, he pointed to the knife displayed onstage and then at Mo Tianliao. “That’s…the…divine artifact?”

“Yes.” Mo Tianliao was so excited he looked like he’d found his salvation.

The cat jumped onto the lion’s head for a better look and made a face. He’d *said* that artifact was trash, but everyone still kept treating the stupid thing as a treasure. Whoever bought this thing would regret it.

The atmosphere in the auction hall had become awkward, but the oblivious auctioneers kept doing their best to hype it up. “True art exists beyond simple first impressions! This style is characteristic of Lord Duantian’s masterpieces. Just look at Lord Shidi’s Skycleaver Axe and Earthsplitter Hammer. Those are both top-grade spiritual artifacts that are almost half-celestial artifacts.”

Shidi frowned. *Why use him as an example?!*

The audience nodded in agreement. It was true: Lord Shidi’s spiritual treasure that was bound to him for life looked no different from a common wood-cutting axe. Their skepticism about the butcher knife on stage dropped a few notches.

“In the interest of full disclosure, however, you should know that this divine artifact is unfinished; no one has been able to complete the forging since Lord Duantian’s demise three centuries ago.” The auctioneer’s tone returned to normal as he assumed the persona of an honest merchant. “Currently, it’s just an indestructible magical artifact.”

His words dispelled the remaining doubts in the audience’s minds. Everyone had their own source of information, and naturally, they all knew that this divine artifact had issues. If it were really that flawless, someone would have already started a bloodbath with it a long time ago.

“Over the last three hundred years, many artificers have essentially determined what actions might lead to the activation of this divine artifact.” The female auctioneer smiled as she took out a jade slip. “Whoever wins the bid for the artifact will also receive the research findings from those various master artificers.”

At this, the atmosphere in the hall livened up again. Those interested in buying the divine artifact naturally already had access to skilled artificers or were artificers themselves. Who could say how long they’d have to spend on it if they had to start from scratch, considering that no one had been able to complete it in three centuries. Access to the research of their predecessors would save them a lot of time and effort.

“The opening bid is three hundred thousand high-grade spiritual stones,” the auctioneer announced.

Although incomplete, this was still a divine artifact, and its value couldn’t very well fall below that of a celestial artifact—although it wouldn’t start much higher either.

The bidding began, rising by increments of ten thousand. In truth, the only ones bidding were a few demon lords and high-level artificers; the rest simply didn’t have the capability to bid—or to craft—at that level.

“Shishu, it seems like some demon lord wants this divine artifact too. We might not…” In a secluded private room, a cultivator wearing the robes of the Liuyun sect tried to dissuade the man beside him, a handsome young man with finely chiseled features. The young man appeared to be only about sixteen or seventeen by mortal standards, but a closer look would reveal he was already at the nascent soul stage.

“We won’t know unless we try.” The young man motioned for the cultivator to keep bidding. “Don’t exceed five hundred thousand,” he added, absentmindedly rubbing the bracer under his sleeve.

The bracer, which appeared to be made of silver, was predominately deep sea-blue in color and inlaid with various rare gemstones. It bore a striking resemblance to the bracelet Pawpaw wore, except that this one was wider and fit snugly on his wrist, with one end rounded and the other protruding. Lord Duantian’s bracer contained a massive inventory space, but even though the man had been dead for centuries, the soul imprint on it still had yet to fade. No matter what the young man did, he couldn’t open it.

It was like carrying a mountain of treasures around everywhere you went, yet being unable to so much as touch a single one. It was vexing, to say the least.

Compared to the orthodox sects, the unorthodox path was far more aggressive and brazen about killing others for their treasure. The entire auction hall was bidding with their divine senses. Even though the price kept rising, Shidi remained unfazed.

“Three hundred eighty-seven thousand.”

“Three hundred eighty-eight thousand.”

Shidi leisurely reached out to the bidding crystal. “Four hundred thousand.”

The bidding paused for a moment before continuing.

“Four hundred thirty-three thousand.”

“Four hundred thirty-five thousand.”

Shidi leisurely reached out to the bidding crystal again. “Four hundred fifty thousand.”

Every time the bidding began to slow down, Shidi would step in with a high bid.

“Fuck. Who the hell is this rich guy?” The nascent soul cultivator was getting really irritated.

The senior beside him patted him on the shoulder. “Ziyu, I told you these demon lords are loaded. You should know that better than I do.”

The price went over five hundred thousand, and the young man had no choice but to signal for the cultivator bidding on his behalf to withdraw. “You must be joking, Shixiong,” he said icily, clenching his fists. “I’m not particularly acquainted with the various demon lords.”

The senior secretly sneered to himself. Ding Ziyu was Elder Ding’s common son, born to a concubine. Everyone knew he’d been sent as a plaything to Lord Duantian. Who was he trying to fool?

The various demon lords were indeed rich, but none were as fixated on that divine artifact as Shidi was, and it didn’t take long for them to

withdraw after a short bidding war. In the end, Shidi purchased a butcher knife for five hundred and fifty thousand high-grade spiritual stones.

The attendant brought over the divine artifact on a tray. Shidi weighed it in his hand and looked it over. “My dear nephew, are you sure this is right?” No matter how he looked at it, it didn’t look like any more than a butcher knife that had been crafted with premium materials.

“Well, you can’t judge a book by its cover.” Mo Tianliao took the butcher knife and caressed its broad blade. On closer inspection, the body of the blade wasn’t pure black; it had some mottled yellow markings. When it was held up to the light, it resembled tortoiseshell. It was still extremely ugly, though. Nobody noticed the nearly imperceptible gleam on the back of the butcher knife the instant Mo Tianliao’s palm made contact.

Shidi didn’t dare draw attention to himself now that he’d purchased a divine artifact, so he tucked it away and led the group out of the private room through a secret passage. This Carefree Auction House was built underground, so every private room came with its own secret passage leading directly to the surface, each with a different exit.

Once they’d emerged from the passage, Shidi quickly summoned his flying ship and flew them back to his demon palace.

“My dear nephew, time is of the essence. You should begin the forging now.” Shidi quickly sent someone to fetch the Primordial Stone and prepare a forging chamber.

“Uh…” With the butcher knife in hand, Mo Tianliao hesitated.

“What? You want to renege on our deal?” Shidi’s face darkened. This kid couldn’t be conning him, could he?

“Oh, no.” Mo Tianliao smiled. “But as you know, I’m only at the foundation establishment stage, and my spiritual power isn’t sufficient to forge a divine artifact, so I hope you can prepare enough spiritual stones for the process.”

Shidi heaved a sigh of relief. The kid just wanted money! With a flourish of his hand, he instructed his men to excavate the required number of spiritual stones from his ore mine.

Spiritual stones from the mines typically varied in size. They were only cut to a uniform size to facilitate trading. When Mo Tianliao walked into the furnace chamber, he found the whole floor covered in high-grade spiritual stones.

He set the Primordial Stone and the butcher knife aside and looked around the forging chamber, finding it suitable. Then he sealed the stone door, leaving only a small hole in the corner for His Feline Lordship to go out and play.

The divine artifact Taishi really was Mo Tianliao's masterpiece, but completing the final step actually wasn't going to be particularly difficult. The challenge would be working out how to explain it to Shidi afterward.

The white cat idly pawed at some fragments of spiritual stones, showing no intent of helping him come up with something.

Mo Tianliao took out the items he'd previously purchased at the Six Harmonies Bazaar: the Xuanyuan Iron and the Meteorfall Stone. The Meteorfall Stone sparkled like starlight under the glow of the underground fire, but if one were to block out that starry light and take a closer look, they would see that it was actually a tortoiseshell color.

He dumped a large pile of Xuanyuan Iron into the furnace to purge the impurities within—a long process that would take him about half a month.

"Selling counterfeit items, huh?" a cool, melodious voice said in his ear. Mo Tianliao looked back to see that his cat had transformed into his gorgeous master again.

"Counterfeit? They're all handcrafted by Duantian himself."

Qingtong couldn't be bothered to reply. He picked up the butcher knife. "What is this piece of garbage still missing?" He flicked the blade with a slender finger. A sliver of light flashed across the blade, expressing displeasure at this disrespect toward a divine artifact.

"No rush to work on him yet." Mo Tianliao moved closer to his master. "Shidi might seem like a bit of an idiot, but he's not so easy to fool."

Qingtong pushed his face away. "So?"

“Shh—” Mo Tianliao took his master’s hand and leaned in again. “Walls have ears. We should keep our voices down.”

Qingtong smacked him on the back of his head. If Shidi really wanted to eavesdrop, he’d be able to hear them no matter how softly they whispered—after all, the walls had ears, right? However, Qingtong had already set up a soundproof barrier in the chamber before transforming into human form.

Mo Tianliao rubbed his head. “I once made a treasure artifact for Shidi that can penetrate sound barriers.”

“Did you now?” Qingtong raised an eyebrow.

“I’d never lie to you.” Mo Tianliao leaned in again, wrapped an arm around his master’s shoulder, and pressed his forehead against his to communicate through their divine souls. “This way, he won’t hear us.”

Without a blood pact, they couldn’t communicate directly through their consciousnesses, but they could still convey their intentions through spiritual contact. No ordinary spirit beast would ever allow a cultivator intimate access to their consciousness. Only a peculiar pair like Mo Tianliao and his cat could achieve it.

“To deceive Shidi, we need to make him a superior-grade spiritual artifact, at least,” Mo Tianliao said as he nuzzled against the smooth forehead and secretly reached out with his divine soul. Humans and spirit beasts without a blood pact rarely did this because it left both parties so vulnerable.

“With your foundation establishment cultivation?” Qingtong scoffed, pushing away his hand, but that misbehaving hand slipped to his waist as soon as it left his shoulder. “Insolent disciple. What are you doing?”

“I need to form a core first.” Mo Tianliao smiled as he pulled his master into his arms to divert his attention. Slowly, he probed his divine soul to check his master’s condition. “Any advice for me?”

“Hmph! You—ugh…” Qingtong was about to claw at the hand on his waist when he suddenly felt the invasion to his divine soul. He struggled. “G-get out!”

“Don’t move. Let me see!” Mo Tianliao held him tightly in his arms with no intention of letting go. The damage to the divine soul within was heart-stopping. He could tell from the old scars there that the divine soul had practically been ripped apart due to the haste in which it had been split. The heartache he felt at the realization almost consumed him whole.

Light flashed, and the gorgeous man in his arms turned back into the elusive furball, who sprang away to huddle in a corner, glaring at him.

Mo Tianliao didn’t go after him, just watched him silently. “Does it hurt?”

None of your business! The cat ignored him and slipped out through the tiny opening, vanishing from his sight.

MINI EXTRA

The Cultivation World Consumer Protection Exposé

Big Hammer: I want to lodge a complaint! Lord Duantian’s divine artifact is a counterfeit!

Woodworker: *shocked* How can you tell?

Big Hammer: It doesn’t have the flame logo.

Woodworker: …Okay, c’mere, I’ll draw one for you. There—better now?

Big Hammer: That’s more like it.

Chapter 47:
Inner Demons

REGAINING HIS COMPOSURE, Mo Tianliao sighed. He had to take things one step at a time; he couldn't rush it no matter how much his heart ached.

The floor had been completely covered in spiritual stones on Shidi's orders. Whole pieces of spiritual stones were actually more suitable for cultivation than cut ones. This demon palace was already dense with spiritual energy to begin with, and the addition of these spiritual stones made the energy in the furnace chamber so thick it was almost tangible. With Mo Tianliao's soul transformation divine soul, he could clearly see the five-colored spiritual energies floating in the air.

He closed his eyes and focused.

The *Art of Burning Wood* that Qingtong had given him provided guidance on the correct way for someone with the body of a divine tree to cultivate—but only up to the foundation establishment stage. Nothing else beyond that. It seemed his cat had hastily compiled it when he learned he was coming. As for what came next, Mo Tianliao himself was a great master at the soul transformation stage, so he might as well rely on his own knowledge rather than asking someone else.

For the Dao is indistinct and elusive. But though elusive and indistinct, there exists in it a form; and though indistinct and elusive, there exists in it a substance.[1]

To enter the ranks of high-level cultivators, one would have to form a golden core, and if he wanted to form his own core, he had first to find his own Way.

In his previous life, he'd spent decades on his quest for the Way. Back when he was still a mortal, his family had been ruined, so, once he had cultivation, he'd exacted vengeance on his enemies one at a time. For a very long time, he'd thought his path was one of heartlessness and massacre, but from time to time, he would succumb to his inner demons.

The old sleazeball had once beat him up and shoved a baby rabbit at him. *“Kid, look at yourself.* Are you truly a heartless person?”

It had just been an ordinary rabbit, tiny and soft, staring at him blankly with round, black eyes and twitching its nose. Mo Tianliao had smiled in spite of himself and reached out with two fingers to stroke the little rabbit’s fur. Immediately, the old sleazeball had snatched the rabbit away and killed it in a couple of swift moves. Mo Tianliao had glared at him, speechless.

“You grin like a little girl at a rabbit, and yet you claim to cultivate the Way of Heartlessness?!” The old sleazeball roasted the rabbit over the fire and ate it.

Realization had dawned on Mo Tianliao then, and he repaid the old sleazeball with a beating in kind.

After that, Mo Tianliao had dedicated himself to seeking his own Way. He’d traveled all over Taixuan—and one day, he finally found it.

His Way was the path of artifact forging. All creations in the world had both essence and dross. Extract the essence and discard the dross—that was what artifact forging was all about. Even within forging, everyone had their own Way. An artificer could walk the path of deliverance and salvation, while an elixirist could take the path of wealth amassment. For Mo Tianliao, his path truly was the act of forging itself—a fact so obvious he’d overlooked it for so many years.

Mo Tianliao was born to forge artifacts. He could draw the same spell arrays thousands of times without rest for practice, and he could stare at the furnace for days when he was smelting ores without ever feeling bored.

Extracting the essence and discarding the dross was Mo Tianliao’s method of cultivation.

However, for all a tree might want to remain still, it couldn’t stop the wind from blowing. He had merely acted on a sudden inspiration to forge a divine artifact, and the world had come baying for his blood. His cat, that tiny little thing, had forcibly ripped his spirit soul apart to preserve Mo Tianliao’s divine soul, and for three centuries, he’d suffered untold agony. Mo Tianliao felt unbearably selfish. He should have just found a mortal

with spiritual attributes to possess as soon as he awakened and gone to look for his cat right away…

“Urgh…” The spiritual energy flowing through his meridians suddenly began to roil like boiling water, churning back and forth as a wisp of black energy weaved through his psyche. Oh no! It was his inner demons!

All of a sudden, a cool sensation seeped in through the crown of his head and dispelled the dark energy. His turbulent spiritual energy gradually calmed down. Mo Tianliao opened his eyes to a flawless face, a forehead pressed up against his, so close he could see each of those long, delicate lashes.

“Pawpaw…” Although his cat hadn’t signed a blood pact with him, he was just as capable as other soul beasts at dispelling inner demons and soothing meridians, and he always had a knack for appearing at the most crucial moment.

“Idiot.” Qingtong pushed him away and curled his lips in contempt. “How do you even develop inner demons from cultivating a golden core?”

Mo Tianliao rubbed his nose and looked up at the furnace. The Xuanyuan Iron within was already done. Over ten days had passed without him realizing it. He looked inward within himself and found his cultivation had reached the middle of the foundation establishment stage.

Cultivation was more than absorbing spiritual energy; it also involved the mastering of spells and the tempering of one’s heart and mind. To form a golden core, a cultivator had to continually refine their soul at the foundation establishment stage and fuse its component parts into a singular, whole divine soul by the time they begat a golden core. To break through to the next stage, they needed to progress simultaneously through all these aspects without letting the speed at which they accumulated spiritual energy lag behind.

But for Mo Tianliao, his spellcraft was already top tier, his state of mind was extraordinarily resilient, and his divine soul had already reached the soul transformation stage. All that was left for his cultivation was the absorption of spiritual energies.

And the spiritual energies at Shidi's palace were so rich that a day here was equivalent to a full month spent absorbing them anywhere else. He couldn't help but progress quickly.

"Nah, it's just…I don't feel secure without you here." Shamelessly, Mo Tianliao tried to pull his cat over, only to be brushed off.

"Insolent disciple, try groping me again and you'll be disciplined according to sect rules." Qingtong swatted him away, then took out a cushion from his inventory bracelet and set it down by the corner of the wall. Turning into a cat, he settled down on it and yawned. Then he took out the ball Mo Tianliao had made out of hemp rope at Xuanji's place and sharpened his claws with it.

The cushion was a cat bed Duantian had made in his previous life, filled with velvet cotton from Tianshan and covered with snow silk spun from ice silkworms so that it remained cool even on hot days, making it perfect for use in a forging chamber.

Seeing his cat enjoying himself, Mo Tianliao let him be.

A chunk of Xuanyuan Iron the size of a fist smelted down to a single drop of molten iron. Using his divine soul as a guide, Mo Tianliao gathered the drops of molten iron floating in midair. The one thousand catties of Xuanyuan Iron Mo Tianliao had bought were condensed down into just a half-foot piece.

He tossed the luminous stones in to refine them. Then he enveloped his palms in spiritual energy and put them together to flatten the semi-solidified iron, his fingers flying as he quickly kneaded the piece into a long strip. The luminous stones had melted instantly on contact with fire. Dipping his fingers into the liquid, he drew twelve spell arrays on the long strip of metal, ranging from spatial to transformation and spirit connection to aura concealment, each of them overlapping with the previous array. He worked fast, but there was no room for error, and he had no visible guidelines to depend on. All he had to go on was his memory.

Once he was done, Mo Tianliao heaved a sigh of relief and wiped the sweat off his drenched forehead. The spiritual energy of a cultivator at the foundation establishment stage wasn't enough for this, so he had to draw and absorb the spiritual energies around him at the same time. To speed up

the formation of his core, he had to exhaust his spiritual energy before absorbing more in a constant cycle. It was mentally taxing, to say the least.

He swiftly shaped the iron strip he'd inscribed with spells into a blade, then wrapped it in spiritual energy and set it aside to cool. Only then did he pick up the Meteorfall Stone.

The darkness stretches infinite, like stars falling from the firmament. Meteorfall Stone could be used to forge spiritual artifacts that could change form, from big to small or sharp to blunt. But Mo Tianliao had no such plans for this Meteorfall Stone. The divine artifact Taishi had been forged with the Meteorfall Stone, which had given it its tortoiseshell color. To fool —ahem, *satisfy* Lord Shidi, he needed to use the same material.

He cut off a palm-sized piece and tossed it into the furnace. Then, exhausted, he collapsed on the ground, his gaze unfocused as he looked at his cat across the room.

When Pawpaw was small, he'd always accompanied Mo Tianliao during his forging sessions. Whenever he saw Mo Tianliao collapse with vacant eyes and pale complexion, he'd circle him anxiously, mewing and licking his face. But now…

The cat was kicking at the ball with his hind legs when the thud of Mo Tianliao hitting the ground drew his attention. He glanced over once, then went back to the ball.

Mo Tianliao rolled over in grief and frustration, splaying out his limbs as he sprawled on the floor like a dead fish.

Pawpaw elegantly trod over, pushing the ball with him. He climbed up Mo Tianliao's head, nudged the ball onto Mo Tianliao's back, and batted it with a paw. The ball rolled along Mo Tianliao's spine without falling off. Satisfied, His Feline Lordship proceeded to frolic around on his back, playing with the ball and completely ignoring the utterly exhausted and speechless Mo Tianliao.

MINI EXTRA

Woodworker: Let's play a game called Play Dead™! Pew pew.

Pawpaw: Mew?

Woodworker: Like this. *collapses and plays dead* When I say pew pew~ you fall over.

Pawpaw: Pew pew.

Woodworker: *falls over* Eh? Hold on a minute.

Chapter 48:
Core Formation

MO TIANLIAO FELL ASLEEP to His Feline Lordship's "massage." When he woke up, the Meteorfall Stone still wasn't ready. Feeling something warm on his back, he craned his head around and found a white furball soundly asleep in the small of his back with his two front paws stretched out comfortably. The ball had fallen to the floor.

He picked it up. It was already frayed from all the clawing. Mo Tianliao smiled and lifted the cat gently off his back, but because of the awkward angle of his arms, he inevitably woke him up.

"Mew?" Qingtong opened his eyes and looked blearily at him.

"Go back to sleep." Mo Tianliao settled into a cross-legged position and set the cat on his lap.

The cat yawned and stretched lazily. Finding himself a comfortable position, he lay down and continued sleeping.

Mo Tianliao made a hand seal and meditated to recoup his depleted spiritual energy. The butcher knife at his feet flashed, desperately trying to remind his owner to work on him first. His meditating owner didn't notice, but the dozing cat did.

He cocked his white furry head and huffed at the butcher knife. A cloud of white fog enveloped the blade, freezing him into a big block of ice so he couldn't flash anymore. Satisfied, Qingtong rolled over on his back, exposing his belly to Mo Tianliao, quietly observing the man's stubbled chin as he licked his paw.

Pawpaw loved to keep Mo Tianliao company when he was forging artifacts. Not only was the warm forging chamber perfect for napping, Mo Tianliao never had time to shave, and the stubble on his prickly chin was just perfect for nuzzling his head against… Those eyes like light-colored glass slowly shifted away. Qingtong bit down on the tip of his paw. He was already someone else's master now. How could he still engage in such childish behavior?

After circulating his spiritual energy for two complete cycles, Mo Tianliao finally replenished what he'd lost and went back to what he'd been doing before being interrupted by his inner demons.

Shutting out external distractions, he absorbed only wood-element spiritual energy, filling his meridians with thick streams that kept circulating through his body. His memories of his childhood gradually faded into the background, replaced by encounters and events since he'd embarked on the cultivation path: the old sleazeball who'd found him in the wilderness; the hypocrisy of the orthodox sects; the law of the jungle on the demonic path. He hadn't cultivated the way of heartlessness. He'd lived through two lifetimes now, and throughout it all, he'd never lost his capacity for emotion. From the moment he'd seen the cat catching fish by the stream, the tiny figure had been destined to dominate all his tenderness.

Those light-colored glass eyes set in a pretty, lovable furry face had eventually transformed into an exquisite, flawlessly handsome visage. Something shattered in Mo Tianliao's mind, and clarity dawned. The spiritual energies around him whirled into a small vortex in his energy center, like rivers converging into the sea—a sign he was about to advance into the late foundation establishment stage.

Mo Tianliao slowly opened his eyes. Feeling something furry against his chin, he looked down and saw the white cat standing on his shoulder with paws on his collar, nuzzling his head against his stubble. He broke into a smile and planted a kiss on that fuzzy head.

Startled, Qingtong slipped, but Mo Tianliao caught him with his palm, the cat's belly facing up. The little furball locked eyes with Mo Tianliao and rolled over, raising a paw to beat him up.

"Pawpaw, I…" Mo Tianliao stared at the snowy furball in his hand, seeing him in a new light. He extended his legs to put the cat between them so that they could have a proper conversation—but he accidentally kicked the butcher knife by his feet. "Huh?"

Taishi, the divine artifact, was encased in a layer of crystalline ice.

"Meow!" The cat struggled to jump down.

"Shizun…" Before Mo Tianliao could get a word in, the cat dashed out of the hole in the door.

Resigned, Mo Tianliao scratched his head. Ever since he'd returned to life, Pawpaw wouldn't let him kiss him, and he'd throw a tantrum any time he tried to. But then again, Pawpaw had grown up and become his master… Mo Tianliao froze midway through getting up, finally realizing what the problem was now.

He'd always thought of his master in his cat form as his Pawpaw, but he'd never considered that even as a fluffy little guy, that was still his gorgeous, aloof shizun. Ah… He supposed he'd been constantly committing the grave offense of disrespecting his shizun.

Mo Tianliao rubbed his nose. He didn't feel bad about this; on the contrary, he was oddly happy.

The Meteorfall Stone was finally refined. Mo Tianliao moved the fist-sized ball of liquid closer and picked up the thin blade he'd forged from the Xuanyuan Iron. Dipping his fingers into the liquid, he steadied himself and quickly began to draw spell arrays. The Meteorfall Stone would solidify instantly the moment it left the embrace of the spiritual energy, so the inscription had to be finished at the exact moment of solidification. There could be no correction or retracing.

There was also no room for interruption when drawing the spell arrays. With the spiritual energy reserve of an early foundation establishment cultivator, he could barely complete 80 percent of it, so he boosted his cultivation to mid foundation establishment stage and used up all the spiritual power he had left in him to finish the spell array in one go. He could take a short break of three breaths after each array, and in this very short time frame, he had to replenish his spiritual energy completely. At this point, it was no longer enough to rely solely on the spiritual energies in the air. Mo Tianliao dug two holes in the floor paved with spiritual stones and stuck his legs in.

After drawing thirty-six spell arrays, he took a short break, collapsing onto the ground and gasping for breath. His meridians were throbbing with pain from being repeatedly depleted and replenished.

Meanwhile, the cat had been wandering around in the demon palace since he left the stone chamber.

The forging chamber was close to the spiritual ore mountain. Due to the abundance of spiritual energies, the surrounding greenery was lush. The

stone chamber was protected with layers of wards that had all been set up by Shidi himself, who was concerned Mo Tianliao might be interrupted during the forging process—or that he might try to make a run for it. However, when the lion had come to play with Pawpaw a few days ago, Pawpaw had coerced him into handing over a talisman that would allow him to pass through the wards.

The cat climbed swiftly up a tall parasol tree, where he looked out into the distance and took in the entire sight of the demon palace. Narrowing his eyes, he unleashed his divine sense. A moment later, he leaped off the tree and slipped into the forest.

Mo Tianliao was drained by the time he'd completed seventy-two spell arrays. He lay on the ground like a dead dog and looked with great satisfaction at a pattern that looked like nothing so much as a jumble of chaos. The Meteorfall Stone had solidified into strange stone branches snaking along the blade, interconnected but not intersecting. All he needed to do now was fill the empty spaces with other materials and shape it, and he'd be done.

By the time he was done casting this brand-new butcher knife, his own spiritual energy had accumulated to maximum level. Unexpectedly, he coughed up blood.

This method of forcing his meridians to their limits would indeed accelerate cultivation, but it was also damaging to the meridians. It wasn't advisable to use it too often. Mo Tianliao set Butcher Knife Number 2 to the side to cool it down and wiped away the blood from the corner of his mouth. Sitting cross-legged with his palms put together, he summoned the regenerative force of the Undying Tree and began to repair his damaged meridians.

There existed in the south a Mount Yanhuo, where flames ignited in the fourth month. Amidst that inferno stood a tree, burning for time eternal.

The regenerative force of the Undying Tree brought with it the Undying Flames. With its regenerative life force, it repaired his meridians while simultaneously drawing fire-element spiritual energy into the dantian. The damaged meridians, akin to the Undying Tree stripped of its bark, were the best fuel for woodfire. Before long, using the damaged meridians as kindling, the woodfire was blazing through his body.

“Ugh…” At the unpleasant sensation of his meridians being scorched, Mo Tianliao clenched his teeth and directed all the summoned woodfire into his dantian, where a feeble tongue of flame began to devour the fire that kept converging toward it. It began to spin, faster, larger, like a growing snowball. Wood-element spiritual energy swirled around the fireball, drawn into the vortex alongside it. When the fireball had grown to its limit, it suddenly shrank. A moment of silence followed—and then it exploded with a thunderous boom.

Kakkaboom! Dark clouds gathered above Shidi’s demon palace, with a small vortex forming at their center. Golden lightning flashed through the clouds and came striking down, followed by a deafening thunderclap, splitting open a crack in the protective barrier around the forging chamber.

Shidi spat out the wine he’d been drinking.

“My lord!” The subordinate who had been kneeling to make his report jumped in fright.

“The barriers broke?” Shidi slapped his thigh and shot out of the door like a gust of wind. He arrived above the forging chamber in seconds, greeted by the sight of the gradually dispersing dark clouds and a small patch of forest burned to cinders. His mouth fell open. “Well done, kid!”

Mo Tianliao was just forming his core, but he’d brought on an astronomical phenomenon befitting of someone undergoing a heavenly tribulation, as if heaven was making its objection known.

Core formation primarily involved condensing a golden core and tempering the divine soul. Only when the divine soul had been formed could one truly embark on the heaven-defying path of cultivation. From then on, a cultivator would break free of their mortal flesh and the cycle of reincarnation.

The stronger the divine soul, the greater the astronomical phenomenon it would invoke. Mo Tianliao’s divine soul was already at the soul transformation stage. Add a portion of Qingtong’s spirit soul to the equation, and it was no surprise that even heaven would issue a warning to a divine soul this powerful. If it hadn’t been for the protective barriers set by Shidi, a soul transformation cultivator himself, the forging chamber might have ended up blasted apart.

Mo Tianliao wiped the sweat from his brow and looked around, just in time to see a furry little white head poke through the hole in the door. Soon, the white cat emerged, but something seemed off about it—it had a fluffy fox tail!

As Mo Tianliao rubbed his eyes and walked over he realized that the cat hadn't grown a fox tail; rather, a white fox was pressed up against the cat, limping. When it saw Mo Tianliao, the fox flattened its ears and clung even closer to the cat.

Mo Tianliao, whose eyes had lit up at the sight of Qingtong, suddenly didn't feel so happy. He picked the cat up and looked at the fox, which was stumbling at the loss of support. "What's this about?"

The cat jumped off and transformed into a gorgeous man. He scooped the fox up into his arms. "He has pretty fur. I'm going to use him as a pillow."

A pillow… Mo Tianliao remembered his senior, who'd been acting as a rug all this time, and understood. "But he's not a cat. Shouldn't you hand him over to the sect leader?"

Qingtong raised an eyebrow. "You're not a cat either."

Mo Tianliao grinned and moved closer. "But I'm a tree, and only cats can climb me."

Qingtong elbowed him away. He was about to say something back to that when Shidi hollered from outside. "My dear nephew, have you succeeded in the forging?"

"I need three more days!" Mo Tianliao shouted back.

Shidi rubbed his hands. It hadn't even been two full months, and the kid had already formed a golden core. There was no way this could happen unless he'd received the power of a divine artifact. Apparently, this divine artifact could propel a cultivator at the foundation establishment stage into the core formation stage—if he bound it to himself with a drop of his blood, wouldn't he ascend straight to immortality? His smile widened until he was practically grinning from ear to ear. He quickly set up another barrier and kept guard outside.

Mo Tianliao looked at the butcher knife in his hand. He'd asked Shidi for the Primordial Stone because he honestly needed it to refine Taishi. This counterfeit had no use for it. A soul transformation cultivator like Shidi, however, with over a thousand years of cultivation, would be able to tell what materials had been used for the spiritual artifact.

"What's your plan?" Qingtong idly picked up the block of ice still encasing the real thing and flicked it with a finger.

"Curious?" Mo Tianliao quirked a cheeky smile. "Let me rub your fuzzy tummy, and I'll tell you."

Smack! Unsurprisingly, all Mo Tianliao got for that was a slap. Covering his head, he crouched down and behaved himself. He took out the Primordial Stone, cut off a small piece the size of a fingernail, and burned it for a moment with woodfire to purge it of impurities. Then he carved it into the shape of a flame with a carving knife and embedded it in the hilt. "There. All done."

Qingtong was speechless. *Talk about minimum effort!*

Chapter 49:
Hogslayer

WHAT WOULD SHIDI THINK if he knew his priceless Primordial Stone had been used for mere blade decoration? Qingtong ran his fingers over the gleaming fire emblem. At least he was better off than the Kugu Patriarch, who'd killed his entire family for their blood essence, only for it to be used to draw a decorative pattern.

"Sweetheart, step back a bit. I'm going to refine the Primordial Stone." Mo Tianliao pulled Qingtong back a little and tossed the remainder of the Primordial Stone into the furnace. The flames suddenly leaped higher, burning so fiercely that even the furnace walls were blazing.

The Primordial Stone was an exceedingly precious material from the beginning of the universe, which was also the origin of spiritual energy. It could absorb spiritual energy without limit. A forging furnace was itself a magical artifact, and the one Shidi had provided him was a treasure artifact. With such a large piece of Primordial Stone feeding it spiritual energy, it naturally blazed with this level of intensity.

The raging firelight flickered across Mo Tianliao's face as he remembered how he hadn't managed to toss the Primordial Stone into the Heaven Ablaze Furnace before disaster struck. The divine artifact had still been in the furnace, freshly forged. Had he tossed the Primordial Stone in then, it would have been easy to fuse them, but now it would require some effort.

"What did you just call me?" A clear, melodious voice sounded beside his ear.

Mo Tianliao stiffened for a moment before turning around with a smile. "Force of habit, precious one."

"You—" Qingtong raised his hand to hit him, but Mo Tianliao caught it.

"Calling someone 'precious' or 'sweetheart' means he is to be cherished, and that's completely accurate in this case," he insisted, looking

at Qingtong with eyes curved into crescents. “Pawpaw is my precious darling, and so is shizun.”

Qingtong was carrying the fox in one hand, and Mo Tianliao had taken hold of his other hand. In his human form, he couldn’t exactly scratch Mo Tianliao with his hind claws, so he simply glared at him and pulled his hand away. “Smooth-talker. Disrespect me like this again, and I’ll—”

Mo Tianliao leaned in to speak into Qingtong’s smooth, fair ear. “Bite me?” he murmured.

The hot breath on his ear made Qingtong’s earlobe go pink. He pushed Mo Tianliao away. Dropping the fox, he turned back into a cat and dashed off to the cat bed in the corner, paying him no further attention.

Dazed from the drop, the still-convalescing fox got up and looked around before trotting over to the soft cat bed and flopping down lazily in it. The cat rested his chin on the fox and kept on glaring at Mo Tianliao.

The corners of Mo Tianliao’s lips twitched. His cat was truly in a class of his own when it came to laziness—he wouldn’t even hold his own head up to glare at someone.

The Primordial Stone was easy to refine, since it could absorb spiritual energy on its own and fuel the flames in the furnace. The forging was completed in less than a day, and Mo Tianliao tossed in the frozen block of divine butcher knife. When he’d first forged this artifact, he had used some special materials that would automatically fuse with the Primordial Stone.

His fingers flew into a hand seal at the furnace, dissolving the liquefied Primordial Stone into a mist. Another hand seal made the butcher knife rotate on its own, sending it into full contact with the vapor. In no time, the mist of the Primordial Stone adhered to the blade, becoming one with it. After a few more hours of refining, Mo Tianliao retrieved the divine artifact from the furnace.

The fused divine artifact didn’t look much different from before apart from a deepening of the tortoiseshell color, giving a darker appearance.

“That’s it?” The cat, having now slept his fill, took human form and came over to look.

“He still needs to be nurtured with the spiritual fire of the universe for forty-nine days.” Mo Tianliao placed the butcher knife in his palm. “But he can change size now.” As if in demonstration, the foot-long broadsword instantly shrank to the size of a willow leaf.

Qingtong frowned. “Where can we find this spiritual fire?” Spiritual fire was exceedingly rare; even Lord Shidi probably didn’t have it.

“In me.” Mo Tianliao smiled and snapped his fingers, igniting green flames on his fingertip. Woodfire was a type of spiritual fire begotten of the natural world.

What made a divine artifact divine was that it had transcended being a mere “artifact” and developed a “spirit” with its own consciousness. When Mo Tianliao read about this in ancient books, he’d hit on a sudden brainwave: Since it was hard for objects to develop their own spirits, why not do the reverse and instill a wisp of spiritual intelligence from the universe into the object?

He hadn’t expected such a fantastical method to actually succeed in creating divine artifacts.

The spiritual intelligence of the universe was very much like an artifact’s spirit—they were both born from nature’s treasures over the years. These spiritual intelligences had typically started forming in ancient times, and they took tens of thousands of years to mature. This was why there were currently no divine artifacts. The average cultivator usually ascended within five thousand years, and all their high-level spiritual treasures went with their masters. There simply wasn’t enough time for spiritual intelligence to form.

Spiritual intelligence formed from the universe could naturally only be refined with spiritual fire from the natural world. That was the only way it could unite with an artifact, allowing it to be controlled at will.

Mo Tianliao put away the miniaturized tortoiseshell butcher knife into his dantian, where the woodfire promptly enveloped it. The knife lay there quietly, although a gleam of light darted about excitedly within. Spiritual fire! Oh, glorious spiritual fire that could allow him to control his body! Just a few more days of tempering, and he’d be able to speak!

“Let’s go.” Mo Tianliao held his hand out to Qingtong.

“Yip!” The white fox ran over and curled around Qingtong’s leg, reminding him not to leave him behind.

Qingtong picked him up and stuffed him into his inventory bracelet. Back when Duantian had forged this bracelet, he’d realized that his cat’s toys included live rats, butterflies, birds, and so forth, and so he’d partitioned out a small space and infused it with enough spiritual energy to contain living creatures. The space was pretty small, though, so the fox probably had to curl up and keep still in there.

This was something Mo Tianliao had worked out how to do after poring over countless ancient texts and performing just as many failed experiments; he’d wasted innumerable materials to create the only inventory bracelet in the whole of Taixuan capable of holding living creatures.

Once the fox was settled down, Qingtong glanced at Mo Tianliao and walked over to put his arms around Mo Tianliao’s neck. There was a flash of white light, and the gorgeous man leaning against his chest transformed into a little cat hanging from his collar. The furball scampered up and leaped onto Mo Tianliao’s shoulder.

Mo Tianliao had been eager to return the hug, but his arms closed around empty air. Savoring the fleeting moment when the gorgeous man had been in his arms, he tidied up the materials on the ground and picked up the counterfeit butcher knife inlaid with the Primordial Stone. Finally, he opened the door to the forging chamber.

After two months shut away inside, Mo Tianliao squinted in the sunlight as the door opened. In that moment of disorientation, though, he spotted a black blur lunging toward him. He instinctively raised his hands to block. The butcher knife in his hand flared unusually bright, startling the attacker, who quickly drew his own magical treasure—a massive, dark hammer—and met the butcher knife head-on.

Boom! A tremendous blast of spiritual energy erupted as the two superior-grade spiritual artifacts clashed. The shockwave was enough to make the forging chamber behind Mo Tianliao collapse.

Mo Tianliao staggered back under the force of the blow, stopping only when he stabbed the blade into the ground to diffuse the impact. Fortunately, Shidi had simply swung the hammer without using much

spiritual energy, and the two spiritual artifacts, being evenly matched, had kept Mo Tianliao from sustaining injuries.

“Well done, my dear nephew!” Shidi burst into hearty laughter. He grabbed the butcher knife and looked it over. When he saw the distinctive flame-shaped Primordial Stone on the hilt, his grin widened even further. “This divine artifact…”

“I’m afraid I’ve only managed to refine the divine artifact into a superior-grade spiritual artifact.” Mo Tianliao sighed. “To refine it further, I’d need to progress in my cultivation.”

“Superior-grade spiritual artifact?” Shidi frowned as he brandished the butcher knife and tapped it against his hammer. The two spiritual artifacts hummed.

“Yes. I miscalculated.” Mo Tianliao put on a look of shame. “I thought it’d be enough if I could make up for my spiritual energy with spiritual stones, but it turns out refining this divine artifact doesn’t only rely on spiritual energy, but also one’s state of mind. My mental cultivation is only at the early core formation stage—I’m a long way from being capable of refining a divine artifact.”

Shidi’s eyes widened. “You need mental cultivation for forging artifacts?” This was news to him.

“All creations have a spirit—I’m sure you must have heard of this before. The divine artifact has its own spiritual intelligence. Only a great master at the soul transformation stage or above can win over that sentience.” Mo Tianliao smiled. “Fortunately, you’re one.”

“Oh?” Shidi, who had been on the brink of losing his temper, brightened up. “You’re saying I can awaken it myself?”

Mo Tianliao merely smiled, neither confirming nor denying it. “You can nurture it in your dantian and talk to it whenever you have time.”

“For how long?” Shidi scratched his head. Why did this sound like raising a child? Was he going to have to tell it bedtime stories?

“Sincerity can move even metal and stone.” Mo Tianliao smiled cryptically and bowed. “Thank you, my lord, for helping me accomplish my

goal. I’m currently lying low in an orthodox sect, but should you ever need me, I’m at your service.”

Shidi choked back the words he’d been about to say to retain Mo Tianliao. The lion bounded out of the forest and pawed at Shidi’s hand, wanting to see the divine artifact.

“Oh, hold on, dear nephew.” Shidi raised a hand to stop Mo Tianliao, who was about to slip away.

Mo Tianliao stopped in his tracks. He was no match for a cultivator at the soul transformation stage at present. If Shidi wanted him to stay, he’d have no choice but to hang around for another forty-nine days and come up with a different plan.

“You haven’t told me this divine artifact’s name,” Shidi announced solemnly.

The corners of Mo Tianliao’s lips twitched. He looked at the hammer hoisted over Shidi’s shoulder. “Since it belongs to you now, it should match the Skycleaver Axe and Earthsplitter Hammer. Let’s call it the Hogslayer.”

After sending the maidservants to escort Mo Tianliao out, Shidi gleefully cradled the butcher knife and tugged on the lion’s mane. The Hogslayer, hah, just the sound of it was so imposing—oh. Hang on!

The lion roared as the grip on his mane suddenly tightened.

“Motherfucker, isn’t that still just a butcher knife?!”

Chapter 50:
Taishi

THE MAIDSERVANT ESCORTED Mo Tianliao to the entrance of the demon palace and presented him with a tray of several dozen high-grade, high-quality spiritual stones. “This is a gift from his lordship. Please accept it.”

Mo Tianliao had used up nearly all the spiritual stones in the forging chamber to refine the artifact, so he didn’t have many left. He’d be a fool not to accept this money. Except… He glanced around. There were a lot of guards at the entrance of the demon palace, and he and the maidservant were standing here in plain sight; anyone passing by outside could see them. What was her intent in giving him this now—to dismiss him like some beggar? Or to set him up for trouble?

After a long look at the maidservant, Mo Tianliao smiled. “Since it’s a reward from his lordship, I should thank him in person.” He made to step back inside.

“Eh!” The maidservant gave a start and hurriedly stopped him. “His lordship is busy. There’s no need to thank him.”

“I have done nothing to deserve this, so I can’t accept it. Please return these to his lordship.” Mo Tianliao pushed the spiritual stones away and left without looking back.

The maidservant stamped her foot in frustration and tried to chase after him, but he summoned his flying sword and left.

***

“WHAT? HE DIDN’T ACCEPT THEM?” Inside the demon palace, a portly man was questioning that same maidservant.

She repeated Mo Tianliao's words verbatim and handed the spiritual stones back to the man. "Master Luo, you shouldn't try to take matters into your own hands in the future. It was quite embarrassing—and we'll be in trouble if his lordship finds out." With a flick of her sleeves, she left.

"Who does she think she is? A lowly maid, acting all high and mighty," Master Luo spat after her retreating figure. He'd been so irritated with that kid that he'd intended to humiliate him, but Mo Tianliao hadn't fallen for the ploy.

"She's right, you know," said a clear voice from behind him. "Stop making decisions on your own."

The man stiffened, then turned around to see Nightmare in his human form, watching him with cold eyes.

Master Luo was one of the artificers in the demon palace, who usually crafted magical artifacts for the demon lord's subordinates. He'd been trying to get into Shidi's good books. When Bahuang City had put the divine artifact on auction, he'd hoped to persuade Shidi to buy it for him to study, but then some upstart brat popped out of nowhere and stole his thunder. He couldn't take that lying down.

"It was a mistake." He forced a dry laugh and handed the tray of spiritual stones to Nightmare. "About that evolved spirit cultivator that the lord brought back—"

"Don't even think about it." With a snort, Nightmare pushed the tray away and left. As he rounded the corner, he crouched down, transforming into a great black lion, and bounded away to the place where the fox was kept. The cat had left, but at least he still had the fox to keep him company.

***

SHIDI HELD UP THE BUTCHER KNIFE and examined it. Summoning his other two spiritual artifacts, he set them together. An axe, a hammer, and now a butcher knife—this was really looking more and more uncultured.

Nightmare burst in through the door. Unable to stop in time, he lunged at Shidi and roared into his ear.

“What a din.” Shidi pulled the lion back by the mane. “What’s wrong? Didn’t I feed you meat this morning?”

The lion shook his head and turned into a tall young man.

A maidservant entered with wine, just in time to see his lordship grasping a human Nightmare by his hair, causing the handsome young man to tilt his head back, exposing his vulnerable neck. It really looked as if… She quickly withdrew from the room and stopped the others who were about to enter. They traded knowing looks and tacitly stood guard at the door.

The lion swatted at his master. “How many times have I told you to stop fucking pulling my mane!”

Shidi released his grip. “You’re *my* lion. I can damn well do whatever I want!”

The two glared at each other for a moment before the lion bared his teeth. “The fox is gone.”

“Gone?” Shidi frowned. “Where?”

The lion rolled his eyes. Why would he be telling Shidi if he knew the answer?! “How would I know?”

“Can’t you sniff it out?” Shidi put away his artifacts and summoned his subordinates outside.

“I’m not a dog!” Flying into a rage, the lion lunged to bite his head, but Shidi swiftly held him down on his throne. The lion twisted around to bite him on the butt instead. Startled, Shidi quickly rolled over and pinned the lion down by the arms.

The subordinates entered to the sight of the demon lord pinning his demonic companion down on his throne. They quickly lowered their heads. See no evil.

“Where’s the fox?” Shidi asked.

“Our men are currently looking for it,” answered one subordinate, kneeling on the floor.

“My lord, I think we should investigate everyone who left the palace in recent days,” Artificer Luo said as he ran over. Everyone in the palace was searching for the fox, so he knew what was going on.

Shidi’s brow furrowed slightly.

“Report—” A guard dashed in. “Venerable Lord Mingyan is here.”

“What?!” Shidi jumped off his throne and went out to meet him. Lord Mingyan was undisputedly the number one demon lord of the demonic path, in terms of both power and strength. Shidi couldn’t afford to slight him.

***

ONCE MO TIANLIAO LEFT the demon palace, he summoned his flying sword and scurried off. But instead of heading north, as logic would have dictated, he went south. He found a town of the unorthodox path and rented a spiritual mount.

Typically, flying ships could only be rented from one’s own sect, as flying ships couldn’t fly back on their own. Spiritual mounts, however, could.

The shopkeeper renting the spiritual mounts looked at this core formation cultivator in astonishment. Spiritual mounts weren’t as fast as flying swords, and only cultivators at the qi-refining stage who still couldn’t control their swords normally rented them for use.

Instead of explaining, Mo Tianliao simply paid the rent and got on the mount. His theft of the fox would be discovered soon, so it was wiser to disguise himself.

The spiritual mount was a huge roc, with a long, slender body and a wingspan of thirty feet. Mo Tianliao sat cross-legged on the bird’s back with a hand loosely holding the reins tethered to its neck, correcting its direction when it veered off course.

The cat tucked in his clothes woke up and climbed out onto the back of the bird, where he rolled around a little before stretching lazily.

Mo Tianliao bent down to plant a kiss on the cat's head. "Darling, we are on a flying mount."

His Feline Lordship swatted him. *Duh, do you think I'm blind?* He leaped onto the bird's head and looked out into the distance. Flying mounts like this one could fly above the clouds, so they could get a clear view of the landscape below from up here.

"Caw, caw—" The bird noticed the little creature on its head, but it didn't mind it. It turned its eyes to look at the cat when it suddenly sensed the oppressive aura of a great spirit. Startled, it lurched, sending the cat tumbling into the air.

Mo Tianliao leaped up and caught the cat in his arms—then, grabbing onto the bird's neck for purchase, he swung back round onto its back.

A light flashed in his arms, and the cat transformed into a gorgeous man with a slender figure. "Why ride such a stupid creature?"

"We're in no hurry," Mo Tianliao answered, his heart fluttering at the sight of the lovely man in his arms. His grip tightened. "If you feel bored, we could chat."

Qingtong threw him a sidelong glance. Who'd want to talk to such a dumbass? He pushed him away, took out the fox from his inventory bracelet to serve as a pillow, and, with a flourish of his wide sleeves, lay down on the bird's back.

The fox, having been taken out so suddenly, looked around in confusion for just a second before he was squashed with his limbs splayed out. With a glance back, he resigned himself to his fate and lay still.

"Why is he so docile?" Mo Tianliao sat down beside his shizun and poked the fox on the head. He'd been quite sharp the last time Mo Tianliao saw him at the Carefree Pavilion, but now, he just let Qingtong bully him as he pleased.

"The cubs tend to be obedient in my presence." Qingtong twirled the fluffy fox tail with a slender finger.

An evolved spirit cultivator at the core formation stage had to be at least several hundred years old—how could they still be a cub? Mo Tianliao

braced his hands on either side of his master's head and looked down at him.

Qingtong looked up at the looming face overhead, his brows furrowing as a thought occurred to him. "Insolent disciple, why did you tell Shidi your name was Mo Yunqi?"

"I was going to say Pawpaw," Mo Tianliao laughed as he grabbed the hand that was about to hit him. "Why don't you tell me first? Why did you pick Qingtong?"

"Tong" meant the rising of clouds, which was exactly what "Yunqi" meant.

Raise the clouds to shade the parasol trees; let not the gales add to the desolation—this was a poem Mo Tianliao had idly carved onto the Heaven Ablaze Furnace back in the day.[2]

Mo Tianliao beamed at his cat. "Shixiong says that spirit cultivators don't have surnames, and they choose their own given name."

"Shut up." Qingtong grabbed the fox pillow from under his head and threw it at Mo Tianliao's face.

***

"HAVE YOU FOUND THEM?" Several demonic cultivators were searching among the clouds, worried expressions on their faces. They were on the only route available that led from Shidi's demon palace to areas governed by the orthodox path. Any flying ships or sword-riding cultivators passing by were stopped and interrogated.

The highest ranking demon lord had come to demand the evolved fox from Lord Shidi. Unable to produce it, Shidi had ordered them to launch a search. Artificer Luo suspected that Mo guy had taken it away, but three days had passed with no sign of the guy—he was likely long gone.

"There's a flying mount over there," one demonic cultivator called out.

“The man we’re looking for is a core formation cultivator. He wouldn’t be taking a flying mount.” Another demonic cultivator curled his lips in contempt. People who rode flying mounts were typically broke cultivators at the qi-refining stage. They wouldn’t get anything out of someone like that even if they robbed him. Better to focus on finding the fox.

***

MO TIANLIAO LOOKED at the demonic cultivators overhead. He moved his sleeping master’s head into his lap, took out a blanket to cover him with, and gently stroked the long, ink-colored hair.

They stayed in the air on the roc’s back for over a month. Just before arriving at Woyun Sect, they swapped to a flying ship.

That was when Mo Tianliao felt a stirring in his dantian. He quickly summoned the divine artifact from within. The butcher knife circled above his head; still the size of a willow leaf, the blade glowed green, seemingly having absorbed his fill of woodfire.

Qingtong’s eyes snapped open. He moved with lightning speed, catching the willow leaf blade between two fingers. The blade struggled between his slender fingers, the flowing light within pulsing back and forth with urgency.

Light flared, and the willow leaf blade turned into a ball of light that dissolved into a shower of tiny light specks before reassembling in midair. No longer resembling a butcher knife, it shifted through myriad forms in all sorts of colors, taking the form of a rod one moment, a long saber the next, and a sharp sword yet another…

In the beginning, there was the Supreme Beginning, and then came the Supreme Origin. The Supreme Beginning is the origin of qi; the Supreme Origin is the beginning of form.[3] *Fixed in neither length nor form, all changes tie to one entity.* And this vessel is called the Supreme Origin—Taishi.

The dazzling display of light came to an end when Taishi turned into the shape of a small bowl and flew over to Mo Tianliao.

Qingtong looked at the bowl. “What’s he doing?”

The corner of Mo Tianliao’s lips twitched as he forced a drop of blood essence from his fingertip and dripped it into the bowl. The bowl closed up around it happily, turning into a round orb to refine the drop of blood. Before Mo Tianliao could say a word, the orb morphed into the shape of a mouth.

“Motherfucker, *now* we’re talking! Not being able to say shit was killing me!”

MINI EXTRA

Cultivator A: I heard the divine artifact is strikingly stunning.

Cultivator B: I heard the divine artifact is earth-shatteringly powerful.

Cultivator C: I heard the divine artifact is incredibly intelligent.

Woodworker: *looks at Taishi* Why do I feel like this is the counterfeit instead?

Hogslayer: *nods* That’s right, it doesn’t have the flame logo!

Taishi: Motherfucker, which part of me *doesn’t* look like a divine artifact?

Chapter 51:
Sectbound

MO TIANLIAO LOOKED at Taishi in his hand and fell silent. This was the spiritual intelligence that possessed the wisdom of the universe? Something wasn't right.

"Told you that thing was trash." Qingtong looked at the big mouth with contempt. To think Mo Tianliao had lost his life for this thing… What an embarrassment.

"Don't say that, Kittycat." Taishi flew over to Qingtong and circled him. "You just don't understand my value yet."

The tortoiseshell mouth instantly transformed into a longsword, paired with an ornate scabbard, before changing back into a mouth to continue the conversation. "I can turn into a flying sword." Then he turned into a broadsword, a bow and arrow, and a set of secret flying darts. But no matter what he turned into, he still retained that hard, tortoiseshell material. With every transformation, he would change back into a mouth to provide running commentary. "I can change into a broadsword, a curved bow, invincible secret weapons—you name it, I have it. There's nothing I can't turn into."

Taishi's voice was giving Qingtong a headache. He swatted him away.

The divine artifact that had been speaking with such gusto promptly turned into a leaf falling from the flying ship. When no one picked him up, he flew back and hid behind Mo Tianliao, where he turned into a mouth again to carry on rambling. "Master, I'm telling you, you've gotta stop spoiling this cat. You need to discipline him if he's ever gonna be obedient —yow! Ow, ow, ow! Hot!"

Mo Tianliao had grabbed the mouth and set woodfire on him. The woodfire that had been used to refine him was the only flame the divine artifact feared—a little burning was enough for Taishi to behave himself. He turned into a wilting tortoiseshell flower lying on the deck of the flying

ship. He even shed a few petals, putting on a forlorn display of a withered blossom with nothing to live for.

Qingtong flicked him. The divine artifact remained motionless and silent. Qingtong pursed his lips. “This trash has been circulating in various auction houses for a century. He’s probably picked up every cunning and mercenary trick of the trade.”

Mo Tianliao rubbed his temples, feeling a headache coming on. He’d never expected Taishi to turn out like this. Back when Mo Tianliao had first unearthed this spiritual intelligence from nature’s treasures, he’d been just a tiny, shy ball of light.

“You can’t say that,” Taishi interjected. “It doesn’t matter if one cultivates by engaging with the secular world or transcending it. Being mercenary has its merit, too.”

Mo Tianliao picked up the big mouth. “We’re almost at the sect. Don’t talk or move when there are other people around.”

“What should I turn into, then?” Taishi flew onto Mo Tianliao’s head, where he found the fire-element spiritual sword. “Master, what do you need other spiritual artifacts for when you already have me?! This is my spot!”

He had to be taught another lesson, but in the end Taishi behaved himself and turned into a tortoiseshell bracer clasped around Mo Tianliao’s wrist.

Woyun Sect was just as quiet as ever. Mo Tianliao had intended to pay his respects to the sect leader first, but his master made a beeline for Woqing Sanctum, and he had no choice but to follow.

“Shizu! Shishu!” The second-generation disciples diligently practicing with their swords bowed in unison when they saw Qingtong, but Qingtong didn’t even nod in acknowledgment as he headed straight for Qingning Palace. Mo Tianliao, who had been following behind his master, nodded at the disciples instead.

“Wait, *is* that Shishu?” The disciples looked at the man in black, whose aura had seen a dramatic increase. This elder of theirs had been in the early foundation establishment stage when he left three months ago. But now…

“Shishu has already formed his core…” Suheng, who had the highest cultivation among the second-generation disciples, could tell immediately.

“What?!” the disciples blurted out in astonishment. How was that possible?! Even the most brilliant talent couldn’t have formed a core in three months.

“Shixiong, you must be mistaken!”

“How is that possible? He’s just a dual-attribute disciple!” Some of the second-generation disciples refused to accept it. How could someone with dual attributes surpass those with heaven attributes and form a core in less than two years? It had to be a lie! The disciple with the heaven attribute who’d joined at the same time as Mo Tianliao hadn’t even established his foundation yet.

Mo Tianliao and Qingtong were greeted by crunching sounds as they walked into the bamboo grove in front of Qingning Palace. A brightly colored tiger was lying on his back in a pavilion, gnawing enthusiastically on a thick bamboo stalk. The chewing had already left it frayed at one end. A Flamefox was crouched beside the tiger, looking at him in resignation. “Menghu, are you listening to me?”

The tiger tilted his head back and looked at the fox upside down. “I hear you, but my shizun isn’t back. How can I attend the Three Sects’ Grand Summit without him in charge?”

“My shizun and Xuanji-shishu are going. You’re currently the only one available from Woqing Sanctum. If you don’t go, who will?” The Flamefox patted the tiger on the head with a paw. “That settles it, then.” With that, the Flamefox turned to leave.

“Hey, Yanlie-shixiong.” The tiger stood up and threw himself in the path of the Flamefox in an attempt to stop him, but in his haste, he tripped over his own bamboo toy and fell onto the fox, pinning him to the ground.

The Flamefox struggled, but it couldn’t free itself. There was a flash of red light, and Yanlie, in his red, wide-sleeved cultivator robe, appeared below the tiger. He reached out to lift the tiger off him.

Qingtong and Mo Tianliao arrived just in time to see a big tiger about ten feet long pinning a man with captivating peach blossom eyes beneath him in an incredibly undignified position.

The corner of Mo Tianliao's lips twitched. "Oh, terribly sorry to interrupt."

Yanlie shoved the tiger away and stood up. Clearing his throat, he bowed to Qingtong in greeting. "You're back, Shishu."

"Yes." Qingtong sat down on the rocking chair. "Go inform your shifu." By this, he meant he wasn't planning to pay his respects to the sect leader.

Yanlie nodded. He was used to this. "I'm here today regarding the Three Sects' Grand Summit," he added. "Since you've returned, please let me know what you intend to do."

Qingtong furrowed his brows slightly. The Three Sects' Grand Summit was a great gathering of the three great sects. It was usually held once every century, and it was indeed now time for the next one. "I'll discuss it with Tianlang later," he said.

Yanlie acknowledged the message and took his leave.

"Shizun!" The tiger clung to the rocking chair and nuzzled his head against the back of his shizun's hand.

Qingtong smacked him, then pulled the white fox out from his bracelet and set it down on the tiger's head.

Taken aback, the tiger strained to look up at his fluffy new hat. "Shizun, do I hand this to the sect leader or Yanlie?" After all, it was a fox.

At once, the fox jumped down and transformed into a young man in white. He dropped to his knees and clung to Qingtong's legs. "Please let me stay with you. Don't give me away."

The white fox would rather be eaten by a great spirit than become the spiritual companion of some human cultivator. That was why he had followed Qingtong for so long, despite his trepidation. Now that there were talks about sending him to someone else, he would never agree to it, no matter what.

"But you're a fox." The tiger circled him. Woqing Sanctum was full of cats—and a scratching post, of course—so it seemed out of place to keep a fox here.

“Let’s keep him for now. We’ll consider the matter later.” With a wave of his hand, Qingtong grabbed the young man by the back of his collar and shook him, turning him back into a fox, before tossing him onto the tiger’s head.

The tiger cocked his head, feeling the little fox trembling. He felt rather sorry for him, so he didn’t say anything else. Just as he was about to take the fox to get some meat, he heard a sudden click. He looked down to see a tortoiseshell tiger trap about to snap shut on one of his front paws, which happened to be right in the middle of the trap.

“Rawr!” The tiger jumped in fright.

The tiger trap turned into a big mouth and cackled mockingly. “Oopsie, did I scare you?”

Mo Tianliao summoned the troublemaker back. “What did I just tell you?”

“You said not to speak if people are around. But this isn’t ‘people.’ It’s a tiger.” Taishi circled Mo Tianliao’s hand. Seeing the tiger eyeing him with curiosity, he turned back into a tiger trap and snapped at him.

The tiger’s tail puffed up in fright, and he quickly took to his heels with the fox still on top of his head. Mo Tianliao rubbed his temples and turned to his master, only to find that he had already fallen asleep. With a sigh, he called for the attendant to fetch a blanket.

“This cat is really pretty, so much more attractive than those cultivation vessels I saw at the auctions,” Taishi marveled as he floated behind Mo Tianliao.

Mo Tianliao gently brushed aside a stray strand of hair on the gorgeous man’s cheek. Then he grabbed the floating mouth and held it in his hands. “He tore his divine soul apart for me,” he said softly. “Do you know any way to mend it?”

The big mouth squirmed, trying to escape the hands that might set his butt on fire at any time. “Feed me the Ninesouls Crystal, and I’ll tell you.”

MINI EXTRA

Little Fox: I wanna stay here.

Eldest Shixiong: No can do. We only keep tigers here.

Little Fox: *points at the Woodworker* Then what is he?

Eldest Shixiong: A tiger scratching post.

Woodworker: *speechless*

Chapter 52:
Ninesouls

TAISHI HAD FUSED with the Primordial Stone, which could absorb the spiritual energy of the natural world on its own, and so he didn't need a supply of spiritual energy. He could change form and fly around on his own with no need to consume food at all.

Mo Tianliao frowned. "What do you need the Ninesouls Crystal for?"

The big mouth flew forward and turned into a ring. "See, if you embed the Ninesouls Crystal here, I'll become a cat collar. If you put me around his neck, I'd be able to nurture his divine soul."

The Ninesouls Crystal had the power to nurture a divine soul. Mo Tianliao knew this, of course, which was why he'd bought it. He grabbed the delusional cat collar. "Duh, of course, I knew that." He hadn't awakened Taishi just so it could tell him things that were common knowledge. If this thing was as useless as that, he might as well…

"Whoa, whoa, okay. It's the white fox who wants the Ninesouls Crystal." Sensing the killing intent radiating off his master, Taishi quickly changed his tune. "I just thought I'd ask since we're acquaintances."

"Mn…" Qingtong, his sleep disturbed by Taishi's noisy voice, made a soft noise and frowned slightly.

Mo Tianliao released Taishi and threatened it to keep quiet. Then he picked up the beautiful man from the rocking chair and carried him inside.

Qingtong had been tense and on edge while he was out there with Mo Tianliao. Shidi was, after all, a soul transformation cultivator, and they'd been in his demon palace, so the lazy cat hadn't been able to spend all day and night sleeping like he usually did. Every time Mo Tianliao opened his eyes after meditation, he'd found either a fully alert furball or his shizun keeping watch by his side.

Once Qingtong was settled down, Mo Tianliao intended to find a quiet place to question Taishi, but he'd hardly stepped out of Qingning

Palace when a bunch of second-generation disciples surrounded him.

“Shishu, you’re finally back. Many matters are awaiting your decision in the Chamber of Administrative Affairs.” Suheng, who was in charge, grabbed Mo Tianliao by the sleeve and dragged him toward the hall.

Woqing Sanctum’s Chamber of Administrative Affairs was bustling with activity. It was time to receive their monthly allocation of resources, and the disciples had formed a queue in the hall. Previously, these allocations had been collected by the disciples-in-charge, who would basically skim some for their own pockets. Now, with open distribution, there were no more issues.

As Mo Tianliao stepped into the chamber hall, everyone looked over at him.

“Huh? Who’s that core formation cultivator?” Other than a handful of disciples-in-charge, the others rarely saw Mo Tianliao. And he’d only just formed his golden core, which had changed his aura dramatically, so no one recognized him.

“That’s Second Shishu,” Suwen replied with a grin. She was queuing among the crowd, and when she looked at his increasingly handsome face, she couldn’t tear her gaze away.

“What?!” the female disciples around her exclaimed in surprise. “Didn’t he just establish his foundation a few months ago?”

“What kind of talent must he be to form a golden core in just a few months?!” someone else blurted out in disbelief. This didn’t make sense. The tempering of one’s mind couldn’t be achieved overnight, unless he’d had some extraordinary encounter and had received guidance from a great master or enlightenment from a spiritual treasure.

A few male disciples nodded in agreement, meeting this news with skepticism. “Or maybe he deliberately suppressed his cultivation to join the sect, and now…”

“It’s not unheard of for someone to form a golden core in a few months,” Suwen retorted, unable to stand the male disciples’ jealous glares. “Just because you can’t do it doesn’t mean nobody can. And stop gossiping. Have you forgotten those people who got disciplined the other day?”

Everyone promptly shut their mouths.

Mo Tianliao's divine soul was, of course, powerful enough that he easily heard the whispers among the disciples. He turned to Suheng. "Who was disciplined the other day?"

When the Qingyun Sect had come to challenge them, they'd blurted out a number of details that were private sect information, such as the fact that the sanctum-master's personal disciple had dual attributes. Someone must have betrayed the sect and leaked the secret. After Mo Tianliao and the others left, the sect leader had ordered a thorough investigation and uncovered a few traitors. Surprisingly, Cheng Xi, who'd been so rude and dismissive toward Mo Tianliao, wasn't one of them. Instead, the culprits were two single-attributed common disciples the sect leader had just taken in. Seething with jealousy, they had wanted to defect to another sect.

"How were they dealt with?" Mo Tianliao sat down and looked at the foot-thick stack of accounts on the table. He massaged his brows.

"Expulsion," Suheng answered. The two hadn't learned the sect's core secret, and they didn't know much else either, so the information they had leaked had ultimately been inconsequential. Showing mercy, the sect leader didn't destroy their spiritual attributes, just expelled them from the sect.

The ones who had hoped to join another sect hadn't been aware that the three great sects wouldn't accept disciples who had been expelled from any of the others. They tried Qingyun Sect and were faced with rejection, then went to Liuyun Sect and were humiliated. In the end, they were forced to resort to some other, third-rate sect.

Mo Tianliao nodded. The sect leader was so softhearted. If it had been up to him, he would have destroyed their basal attribute before throwing them out. People like that couldn't be trusted—once they gained power, they would no doubt seek revenge. This sect had so many secrets, and they might prove hard to keep hidden if they didn't kill transgressors as a warning to others.

At the Chamber of Administrative Affairs, there was a mountain of issues waiting for Mo Tianliao's approval. A resigned Mo Tianliao discovered that his senior had only handled the urgent matters, leaving

everything else that could be delayed for him to attend to. By the time Mo Tianliao had settled everything, it was already dusk.

Mo Tianliao took Taishi to the back mountain, planning to question him as he cut down some fruit trees to cook dinner for His Feline Lordship.

The back mountain was still as lush as ever. Mo Tianliao found an appropriately thick tree and summoned a tortoiseshell long axe, which he swung at the tree.

A tiger with a white fox on his head sprang out of the forest and transformed into human form. “Cutting trees again?” he asked by way of greeting.

Crack—the tree, only as thick as a teacup, fell in one blow. Mo Tianliao replied in the affirmative and carried on chopping the trunk into chunks, which he split into firewood about two fingers wide.

“Nice axe you’ve got.” Menghu lifted the fox off his head. “I have to make a trip to the sect leader’s place. Watch this guy for a while, I’ll come back for him later.”

“Why don’t you just take him with you?” Mo Tianliao glanced at the fox, who was crouching in a ball on a nearby rock. He didn’t think a fox who could escape from an auction on his own would be so fragile that he needed someone to watch him.

“He’s afraid of people,” his senior replied in resignation. He left with a wave of his hand.

Mo Tianliao cast another glance at the fox. His Feline Lordship had used this fox as his pillow during their journey outside, and now he didn’t even want to sleep on his lap anymore. Silently reproaching himself for his pettiness, Mo Tianliao gathered the chopped firewood and carried it to a clearing.

The fox followed him, turning into a young man in white, and squatted nearby.

“What’s your name?” It dawned on Mo Tianliao that he hadn’t actually spoken to the fox in all this time.

“Shuangren,” the young man answered, hugging his knees as he watched Mo Tianliao work. Neither of them said anything for a while, but

then he abruptly asked, “I heard you bought a purple crystal from the marketplace. Can I see it?”

Mo Tianliao raised an eyebrow. “You know what that is?”

Shuangren pursed his lips. “I don’t know if the one you have is what I want, but I’m looking for the Ninesouls Crystal.” After all the days he’d been with them, he could tell that Mo Tianliao was a powerful artificer. He’d sworn a blood oath not to betray Qingtong, though, and Qingtong had forbidden him from telling others about Mo Tianliao, so he’d never brought it up with anyone else.

He took out a handful of silver pieces. “These are the Shielding Silvers I stole from the auction house. With these, I’ll be able to craft an artifact that can evade the Spirit-Disciplining Horn.”

Astounded, Mo Tianliao took the silver fragments. These really were made from rare Shielding Silver**.** “You want me to make it for you?”

Shuangren stared into Mo Tianliao’s eyes. “The Zhenren’s divine soul is damaged, so you must need it too.”

Mo Tianliao’s eyes instantly turned cold. He lunged over and grabbed the young man by the throat. “What are you scheming?”

“I’m a Soul-Soothing Frostfox, so I can tell.” Shuangren coughed, but he didn’t struggle. “I’ll give the silver to you, but you have to promise to make me an artifact that can defend against the Spirit-Disciplining Horn.”

The Soul-Soothing Frostfox was a spirit beast that lacked the ability to freely hide the aura of its divine soul, and its very presence had the innate ability to soothe divine souls, making it an easy target for capture. No wonder Pawpaw had been using him as a pillow. Sleeping on a Soul-Soothing Frostfox would help alleviate his headaches.

Mo Tianliao released his grip, frowning as he looked at the determined young man. He’d already left the auction house, so why was he still so fixated on the horn?

“My younger sister was captured too,” Shuangren added. He bit his lip. “I need to find her.” Frostfoxes usually lived in the mountains and were independent, solitary creatures. If someone tried to force his hot-tempered

sister into signing a blood pact, she might do something rash. He needed to find her quickly.

Mo Tianliao stared fixedly at him for a moment, then gently patted him on the head. “All right. I’ll give it a try.”

A short distance away in the forest, a gorgeous man dressed in snow-white silk woven by merfolk watched from behind a tree before leaving quietly.

Mo Tianliao took the grilled pheasant with him to Qingning Palace. Learning that his master was still asleep, he gave it to his senior who had just returned. He returned to his courtyard and stared at the Shielding Silver in his hand, lost in thought. The Ninesouls Crystal could be made into something that could nurse the divine soul or evade the Spirit-Disciplining Horn. But could these two functions be combined?

“What’s wrong? Can’t sleep on this long, lonely night?” Big Mouth Taishi flew back and forth overhead. “Yow! Ow, ow, ow! Hot!”

With one hand blazing woodfire, Mo Tianliao grabbed Taishi with the other hand. “Don’t you have something to say to me? Hm?” He’d asked about repairing a divine soul earlier this morning, and this fellow had kept changing the topic.

“My good man, let’s not use force,” Taishi yelled. “I might know the secrets of the universe, but I haven’t fully grasped them yet. Give me time to think!”

Mo Tianliao threw Taishi aside and lay on his bed, staring blankly.

Taishi turned into a candlestick and played dead on the floor, although he couldn’t refrain from speaking up again a little while later. “Without a beauty in mine arms, how can I slumber?” he muttered. “O fair maiden, where art thou…”

A moment later, Mo Tianliao sat up and rolled off the bed.

“What are you doing?” Taishi flew after him as he walked out of his courtyard, passed through the bamboo grove, and climbed through a window.

“Sleeping.” Mo Tianliao got into the large, soft bed in the inner chamber of Qingning Palace and gently pulled the sleeping beauty into his

arms. Qingtong instinctively nuzzled his face against that warm chest.

Taishi slowly descended onto the bed and watched as Mo Tianliao wavered between wanting to kiss Qingtong and not daring to. Anxious, he hopped around to the side, whispered, “Need some help?”—and turned into a tortoiseshell jade phallus.

Chapter 53:
Discipleship

MO TIANLIAO LOOKED AT TAISHI, stunned speechless. The artifact really had learned all sorts of things during all those years in auction houses. Wordlessly, Mo Tianliao raised a hand and rewarded Taishi with a small fireball.

“Ah! Yeouch! Hot!” Taishi zoomed wildly around the room. Mo Tianliao warned it to keep quiet and pulled the thin quilt over himself and Qingtong.

Qingtong slept soundly in his arms, never stirring once. His slender hand, which had been left exposed outside the blanket, was a little cold from the cool autumn night breeze. Mo Tianliao warmed it between his palms and planted a kiss on the back.

At the ticklish sensation, Qingtong automatically pulled his hand away, but at the same time he snuggled closer into Mo Tianliao’s arms. A soft purring sound rumbled in his throat.

Mo Tianliao looked down at the handsome face nestled against his chest, his heart melting at the sound of that contented purr. After all these years, this cat was the only one he cared about. No matter how much effort it took, or what price he had to pay, it was *imperative* that he cure Pawpaw and stay with His Feline Lordship for eternity. They would ascend together and look for that old sleazeball.

They slept soundly through the night.

The next day, sunlight streamed through the window Mo Tianliao had opened the night before and shone upon the bed. Mo Tianliao took a deep, comfortable breath and slowly opened his eyes, only to meet a cold, beautiful stare.

“Why are you here?” Qingtong asked him, frowning.

“My bed’s too hard,” Mo Tianliao said without batting an eyelid. “And anyway, I can’t sleep without you in my arms.”

Qingtong raised a leg to kick him off the bed, but Mo Tianliao, anticipating this, grabbed his ankle under the covers. The skin felt so delicate in his hand that he immediately didn't want to let go. Qingtong scratched him, and in response, Mo Tianliao pinned down His Feline Lordship's legs with one of his own. The two play-fought on the sheets. It was just like every morning at the demon palace, when Mo Tianliao had been bitten awake by His Hungry Feline Lordship, and man and cat had always ended up tussling playfully in bed for a moment. Inevitably, Mo Tianliao would end up with bite marks all over his face and hands, and he would dutifully get up to feed his esteemed cat.

His Feline Lordship's paws were lightning fast, and even when he didn't use spiritual power, his dazzling array of scratch attacks was tough to counter. Taking advantage of his height, Mo Tianliao clamped his own legs over the long, slender legs trying to kick him off. He rolled over on top of Qingtong and pinned his wrists down with both hands, taking the opportunity to catch his breath.

"Whew, enough fooling around." Mo Tianliao nuzzled his nose against his master's. "It's still early, so let's sleep a little longer."

Qingtong narrowed his eyes, parted his lips—and chomped down.

"Ow! That hurts!" Mo Tianliao, who never learned his lesson, took yet another bite to the nose.

Creak—the door to the inner chamber opened a crack, and a dog's head slowly poked through, whispering, "Tongtong, are you a…wake…" He turned to look at the bed, his jaw promptly dropping.

The door to Qingning Palace's inner chamber had a protective barrier in place, but Tianlang-zhenren possessed the sect leader's token; there was nowhere in Woyun Sect he couldn't go.

"Arf, arf, arf!" Tianlang's reaction was instant. He charged in like a massive gray-furred boulder launched from a catapult, knocking Mo Tianliao clear off the bed, where he ran in anxious circles on top of the sheets. "Tongtong, are you all right? Damn it!" He turned and snarled at Mo Tianliao, his eyes brimming with killing intent.

Blast it to hell and back. He always knew this old devil was no good. He shouldn't have been so softhearted and let him stay. He decided to bite

his head off right there and then.

Sensing the murderous aura pouring off the wolfhound in waves, Mo Tianliao summoned Taishi, but there was no response, no matter how many times he called for it.

That was when Qingtong sat up and smacked the dog on the head. “Noisy!”

The dog shrank his head back with a whimper and gave his junior a look of betrayal. It really was true that a cat grown was a cat gone; see, he was already helping some outsider beat his senior!

Qingtong tossed the dog off the bed and stood up barefoot on the cushion. Mo Tianliao rose to fetch an outer robe hanging on the clothes rack at the side and helped Qingtong dress. With nimble fingers, he secured the waist sash. He was about to look for a hair ribbon to secure the smooth hair cascading over his back when Qingtong stopped him.

This dumb dog must have come looking for him this early in the morning to tell him something. He hoisted the giant wolf by the scruff of his neck with one hand and dragged him out.

Mo Tianliao blinked. Wasn’t he supposed to be the one getting kicked out so that his master and sect leader could discuss affairs? With a slight frown, Mo Tianliao got down on the floor to look for Taishi. He’d been summoning that guy for basically forever, and he still hadn’t shown up. Didn’t he know his own master had almost had his head bitten off?

After searching for a while, he finally found a block of ice under the bed, with a tortoiseshell dildo frozen inside. Mo Tianliao’s expression instantly darkened. No wonder his master had wanted to talk outside. This thing was really too embarrassing.

Mo Tianliao melted the ice, and Taishi launched into a tirade as soon as his head started to emerge. “That cat of yours is so fierce! I didn’t even get to say a word before he froze me. Yow! Ow, ow, ow! Hot!”

Roasted yet again by its master’s woodfire, Taishi screamed in the flames…yet he didn’t change his form. He kept writhing around in the shape of a phallus. Mo Tianliao couldn’t bear to watch. He used their blood pact to force Taishi into the shape of an orb.

When he’d first crafted Taishi, he’d infused a wisp of his own divine soul into him. Then, after the forging had been completed, he’d given Taishi a drop of his blood essence. Taishi was totally in sync with him, and they could communicate directly through their consciousness. With just a thought, Taishi could change his form as Mo Tianliao wished—except that Taishi preferred to open his big mouth and talk.

***

“WHERE’S THAT FOX OF YOURS? Show me.” Finally recovering from the blow, the sect leader transformed into his human form with an otherworldly air and sat down in the main hall.

Qingtong sent his attendant to summon the fox, then accepted a warm cloth another attendant handed him to wipe his face. “He has only just evolved into human form and is currently in the early core formation stage. He’s still very young.”

Tianlang looked up at him. “Are you planning to keep him by your side?”

The scene from yesterday in the forest flashed before Qingtong’s eyes: the dashing demon lord stroking the delicate young man on the head. His brow furrowed slightly. “No,” he said. “It’ll be better for him if you take him.”

“Greetings, Zhenren.” Shuangren entered and kowtowed in greeting. Qingtong still hadn’t taken him as a disciple, so he could only address him as zhenren.

Tianlang squinted at the young man and flicked a finger, sending a surge of powerful force toward him.

Shuangren was startled, but since Qingtong had made no move to stop him, he fought back his fear and remained on his knees. The force didn’t harm him, but when it struck his face, he felt his body go limp, and he transformed into a fox.

“Yipe!” The fox panicked. Now that the sect leader knew he was a spirit cultivator, he would be taken away and given to someone else. What should he do?

Tianlang lifted the fox up and watched him swat frantically at the air. He pondered for a moment. “A Soul-Soothing Frostfox?”

“That’s right,” Qingtong replied, taking the tea the attendant handed him to rinse his mouth.

“You should keep him. He’ll be perfect as a pillow.” Tianlang was all too quick to let the fox stay when he discovered his potential use as a headache alleviator. Seeing Qingtong’s look of impatience, he hurriedly added, “If you can’t be bothered to teach him, we can just have him learn from Yanlie.”

Qingtong hummed in agreement.

“Fox, are you willing to join Woyun Sect?” Tianlang set the fluffy little fox down on his lap and stroked his fur.

“Woo…?” Shuangren was confused.

The sect leader turned back into a giant wolf and crouched in front of the little fox. “Since the great war between the immortals and demons, our sect has been sheltering spirit cultivators,” he explained enigmatically. “Any spirit beast unwilling to form a blood pact with a human cultivator can join our sect, but remember, you must never divulge the sect’s secret; otherwise—”

“Aoof!” The fox pounced into the sect leader’s fur. “I-I’m willing! Even being an outer disciple is fine!” He and his sister had always lived in the snowy mountains, too timid to venture into populated areas. He’d never imagined there was a sect that sheltered spirit beasts. This was wonderful news!

“You have excellent aptitude, so for now you can be an inner disciple under Qingtong’s tutelage. But he’s busy, so if you have questions about your cultivation, you can ask my eldest disciple, Yanlie.” Seeing Qingtong yawning again, the sect leader picked up the fox in his mouth. He was about to take him to meet Yanlie when Qingtong casually spoke up again.

“What did you say to Mo Tianliao yesterday?”

The wolfhound turned back with the fox in his mouth.

The little fox's head drooped. "I asked him for help in forging an artifact that can defend against the Spirit-Disciplining Horn. I have to save my sister."

The sect leader set the fox down, spat out a mouthful of fur, and said kindly, "Our sect rule is that we can help when we come across spirit cultivators, but we must first ensure our own safety."

The fox lowered his head. "I understand…"

The sect leader tilted his head. This child really was rather pitiful. He licked the fox's head. "But since she's your sister, we'll think of a way."

The sect leader then carried the little fox away in his mouth to meet Yanlie, but Qingtong narrowed his eyes ever so slightly. *Crafting an artifact for someone else, hmm?*

Chapter 54:
The Way Of The Elixirist

MO TIANLIAO COULD NO LONGER use the spiritual sword on his head, or Taishi would nag him to death about its supposed dignity as a divine artifact. He'd still need an ordinary spiritual sword for everyday sword-riding, but since it wouldn't be used for combat, he could craft one specifically for flying that would be lighter and more energy-efficient.

Mo Tianliao gave the size-changing fire-element spiritual sword to Menghu and had him sell it for him.

Menghu held the sword, clearly loath to part with it. "Shidi, this is a good sword, which is rare in itself. You might as well sell it to me."

"I forged it when I was at the foundation establishment stage, so it's nothing special." Mo Tianliao raised an eyebrow. He had no plans to sell it to his senior. The spiritual stones in his inventory bracelet were running out, and he needed to save up to buy materials he could use to earn more money. He couldn't demand a high price if he sold it to his senior. "If you want one, bring me some suitable materials, and I'll forge an even better one for you."

Delighted, Menghu thumped his chest and promised to get Mo Tianliao a good price.

Once the tiger had bounded off, Mo Tianliao made his way to Woxuan Sanctum.

In the Valley of Flowers, Huaqing, still as flamboyantly dressed as ever, was losing his temper at a rabbit among the underbrush. "It's bad enough you wrecked the medicinal garden; why destroy my flowers too?! I told you these flowers are poisonous and inedible, but you just wouldn't listen to me!"

Mo Tianliao walked over and saw a green rabbit crouching among the flowers. His eyes widened in surprise. "A green rabbit? How strange."

"Ha ha ha, nah." Zimo walked over with a drumstick in his mouth. He gobbled it down and scooped up the chubby rabbit on the ground. "He

ate poisonous flowers."

Mo Tianliao glanced over. Several strange flowers were growing where the rabbit had been standing earlier, each with eight petals in a peculiar hue of deep green.

"Do you know how hard it is to cultivate these Green Devil Flowers? And just like that, they're gone." Huaqing had no sympathy at all for the green-furred rabbit. Visibly distressed, he cradled the flowers that had been gnawed bare. These were the main ingredients for forging Green Fur Pills. What would he do if his senior asked him for them again? He'd even been planning to make more to gift his master.

Mo Tianliao suppressed a laugh and looked at the pitiful rabbit. "I've seen green-haired turtles, but this is the first time I've ever seen a green-furred rabbit. Looks pretty good, though."

Huaqing's eyes lit up. "Really?" He circled Zimo, who was still holding the rabbit, a new money-making scheme forming in his mind.

The Green Devil Flower could turn a rabbit green, but there were plenty of other flowers that could be used as dyes. He just had to refine the appropriate pills, and purple martens could be turned into snow martens, black bears into brown bears, and striped tigers into rainbow-colored tigers! Eventually, the entire spirit cultivation world would get hooked on changing fur colors, and his color-changing pills would be in high demand.

The corner of Mo Tianliao's lips twitched as he watched Huaqing's grin grow increasingly deranged. "I'm here to discuss something with you."

Mo Tianliao was already an expert in the art of crafting artifacts. He knew that to mend the divine soul, he couldn't rely on just artifacts or just elixirs, so he'd thought of combining the two. Huaqing was a renowned elixirist of the orthodox path; Mo Tianliao couldn't go wrong asking him.

"I heard you're learning to forge artifacts," said Huaqing as he plucked the remaining Green Devil Flowers, along with several flowers in other colors. "If you want something to do with that, I can't help you there." Though elixir concoction and artifact forging both used furnaces to heat materials, they were actually completely different.

"The Dao follows the course of nature, and through it, all things are connected." Mo Tianliao smiled. "What would you usually do if you want

to fuse two materials with different effects into one?”

“Fusing materials with different effects is quite hard, especially elixirs. Many ingredients counteract each other. To combine them, you need to find medicinal herbs that can suppress the clashing properties. This requires mastery of the refining process for the two different elixirs and an understanding of the complementary and contradictory principles behind them.” He plucked the green rabbit from Zimo’s hands. “Take this rabbit, for example. It can be used for making elixirs, but you can’t mix it with contradictory materials like the Moneygrowth Herb, or the rabbit meat won’t be fresh.”

The chubby rabbit kicked his legs and glared at him.

Mo Tianliao took the rabbit and stroked his long, soft fur. He was fairly certain this was Bailuo, the third disciple of the sect leader, but he was no longer white like the Bai in his name suggested.

Contradictory materials, huh? Mo Tianliao lowered his eyes. The Ninesouls Crystal Anti-Spirit-Disciplining Horn required a sound-reducing spell array, while to nurture a divine soul, he'd need a soul-soothing spell array. Sound-reducing and soul-soothing were two completely contradictory spell arrays. Both acted on the divine soul, but the sound-reducing one was for external defense, while soothing was for internal healing. He'd need to find the point of connection between them and think of a way to prevent them from interfering with each other.

"I understand now. One more thing." Mo Tianliao smiled. "Are you able to make elixirs for soothing the divine soul in liquid form?"

"Liquid?" Huaqing's brows furrowed slightly. Elixirs all came as round pills. "Just dissolve them in water."

"That will reduce their potency." Mo Tianliao wanted to create an artifact that would automatically dispense either soul-condensing pills or something similar when his master had a headache in his absence and was too weak to take medicine.

"I'll have to experiment." Aside from the Nectar of Intimacy, this was the first time Huaqing had heard someone request liquid elixirs.

"Then I shall have to trouble you." Mo Tianliao cupped his hands in thanks. "Would it be possible for me to learn elixir making from you?"

Huaqing looked at him in surprise. "Between the art of elixir concocting and the art of artifact forging, you can only master one. Learning how to craft elixirs when you've only just begun to learn to forge artifacts is rather inappropriate, I'm afraid."

"I know my limits, but I still hope you'll teach me." Mo Tianliao said nothing more and gazed sincerely at Huaqing.

"Tsk, tsk, so greedy. Careful you don't choke." Zimo snatched back the green rabbit and sauntered away with him balanced on his head.

Huaqing agreed with Zimo. He wanted to advise against it, but it wasn't his place to say more, so he pulled a face and threw him a jade slip, telling him to memorize it before he came to him again.

The jade slip had a record of the names and properties of various spiritual herbs. Mo Tianliao was thrilled. This was likely Huaqing's personal compilation, which also noted contradictory materials, concoction taboos, and so on. Memorizing this would save him a lot of trouble.

***

WITH THE RABBIT ON HIS HEAD, Zimo returned to Wotian Sanctum, where he encountered the second-generation disciples practicing with their swords in the southern hall.

"Second Shibo, that green hat of yours is quite nice," one honest second-generation disciple praised him earnestly.

"Second Shishu, where did you buy the green hat?" Chifeng, Chishan, and Chiyuan traded glances and bit their lips to hold back their laughter.

"Rah-ah!" the leopard cub Chishan had brought along chimed in.

The three of them were spirit beasts with average aptitudes. None of the sanctum-masters had taken them in as direct disciples, so they studied under Yanlie's tutelage. The little leopard cub Qingtong had brought back had been passed from the sect leader to Yanlie, who in turn had passed it on to his own disciples. The leopard cub was too young to practice cultivation techniques, so Chishan took it with her everywhere.

Zimo nodded to them. As he passed through the south hall and rounded the covered walkway, he bumped into Moxiong, his fourth junior, who was on his way to teach the disciples swordplay. Moxiong was dark and sturdy with a muscular physique, and the collision sent Zimo staggering back.

Moxiong caught him, though. "Second Shixiong, your green hat looks like Third Shixiong."

Green hat, green hat… Zimo finally realized the problem. Wasn't "wearing a green hat" supposed to mean you were a cuckold?! He quickly took the rabbit down from his head. The green-furred rabbit stared at him like he was an idiot. When his feet touched the ground, the rabbit transformed into the usual handsome and serene Bailuo, except that his flowing white robes were now green.

Yanlie, who was giving the little fox a tour of Wotian Sanctum, happened to see the entire scene. Suppressing a smile with great difficulty, he said to the fox on his shoulder, "Don't hang around them too much. You'll become silly."

***

ONCE MO TIANLIAO HAD gathered all the necessary materials, he informed his master that he needed to forge something and disappeared into the furnace chamber. The fox pillow was learning spells from Yanlie, while the tiger rug had wandered off somewhere. Qingtong sat on the rocking chair, bored.

A tortoiseshell mouth floated over. "Hi, hot stuff, want me to keep you company?"

Qingtong opened one eye to look at Taishi, then closed it again.

Taishi landed on Qingtong's lap and transformed into a strand of foxtail grass with a long, slender stem and a fluffy head—except it was tortoiseshell colored. It looked weird, and the fine fuzz on top was incredibly stiff, like steel needles.

The foxtail grass swayed back and forth by itself to tease the cat.

Qingtong opened his eyes and looked expressionlessly at this particularly irritating piece of grass. Slowly, he extended a hand, and five sharp claws sprang out as he swiped hard, putting spiritual energy into the blow. Startled, the foxtail grass stiffened. Mere moments before impact, it disintegrated into powder on its own initiative. The tortoiseshell residue scattered across the sky, glittering in the sunlight due to the Meteorfall

Stone in it. The instant the pieces touched the ground, they consolidated back into a big mouth. “Come on, don’t be so touchy. The treasure artifact my master is forging is highly complex. It’ll take at least ten to fifteen days, so he sent me to keep you company.”

Qingtong slowly clenched his fists under his sleeves. *Ten to fifteen days.* He sure cares a lot about that fox’s artifact!

***

MO TIANLIAO COMPLETED the magical artifact he’d promised the fox. It only required a small piece of the Ninesouls Crystal and some Shielding Silver. Once he was done with it, he tossed it into his inventory bracelet and started work on the one for his master. This one required meticulous craftsmanship, as fusing two functions into one was no easy feat; he even ruined a small piece in his attempts.

During the forging process, Mo Tianliao tried to extract a small wisp of his divine soul. His soul and the portion Qingtong had given him had already fused into one, and he wanted to see if his master would be able to reabsorb it if he wore it all the time.

Extracting a divine soul was excruciatingly painful. Unless it was for something significant, like Taishi, it was rare for an artificer to infuse their divine soul into an artifact, because if it got damaged, the original soul would also be affected.

It took ten more days, but he finally succeeded. Mo Tianliao collapsed to the ground and looked at the purple pendant in his hand, a slow smile spreading across his face. The border of the pendant was rimmed with the Shielding Silver, surrounding an intricate openwork design in the center. Under the warm firelight of the furnace chamber, it refracted a stunning array of rainbow colors.

Just then, the door to the furnace chamber creaked open. A gorgeous man in white strolled in and plucked the pendant from Mo Tianliao’s hand.

Mo Tianliao looked up at him with a smile. “Shizun…”

MINI EXTRA

Huaqing: Wanna turn into a green-furred rabbit? Or a red-furred wolf? Color-Changing Pills—because you're worth it.

Bailuo: Exclusively endorsed by the Incomparably Handsome Rabbit!

Zimo: Selling for only 998! Wow!

Woodworker: Shizun, your turn.

Pawpaw: …Now available on Ameowzon.

Chapter 55:
Misunderstanding

DUE TO THE PENDANT'S openwork design, the purple Ninesouls Crystal appeared to be a lighter, pastel purple hue. The silver encased the entire crystal, which had been polished smooth, ensuring that it wouldn't scratch the skin. In Qingtong's palm, which was so fair it was almost translucent, the crystal looked even more crystalline.

Those cold eyes gazed dispassionately at Mo Tianliao lying on the ground, showing neither concern nor mockery. "You go into seclusion for ten days just to forge this?" He'd sure put his heart into it.

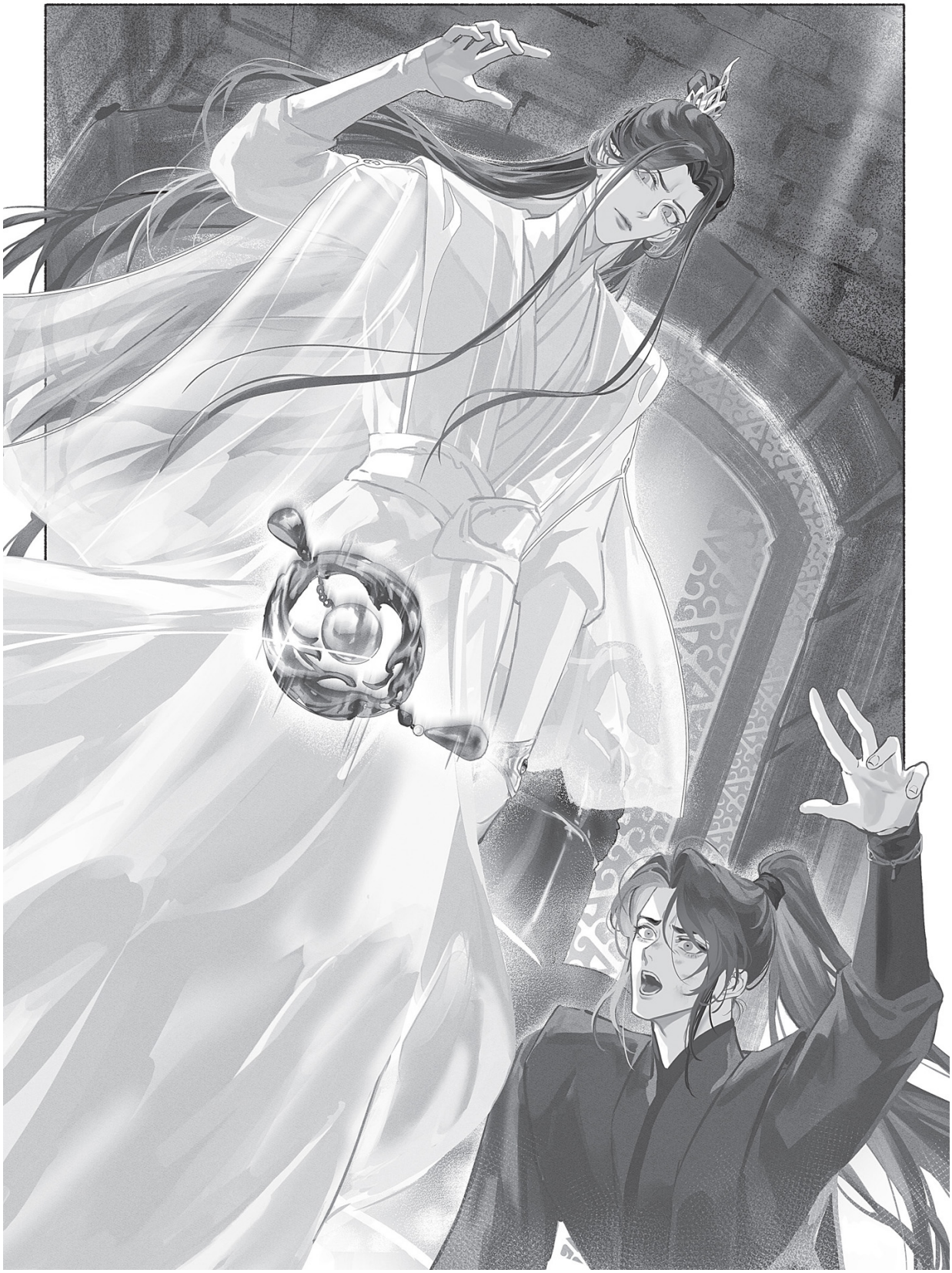
"Yeah…" Mo Tianliao took a breath and was about to get up when his eyes widened.

The fair hand turned over, sending the Ninesouls Crystal pendant falling to the ground.

"No!" Mo Tianliao lunged for it.

Qingtong was initially just displeased, having never seen this fool so dedicated to forging something for someone other than him. But when he saw Mo Tianliao rush over to catch the pendant despite his weakened state, fury overcame him. With a wave of his hand, the pendant that was about to fall into Mo Tianliao's hand instantly went flying and smashed into the furnace.

Crystal fragments spattered onto Mo Tianliao's face. His expression instantly darkened. "What are you doing?!" he yelled and propped himself up, grabbing the pendant. The wisp of the divine soul within was about to dissipate. Mo Tianliao hastily grasped the pendant in his hand and focused his mind on reabsorbing the soul fragment he'd painstakingly extracted.



A wisp of divine soul wasn’t much, and losing this bit would only give him a headache for a few days at most. However, it also contained Pawpaw’s divine soul. For someone with a deficient divine soul like him, every tiny bit was precious. If losing this bit prevented him from fully restoring his divine soul in the future, Mo Tianliao would cry himself dry.

Startled by his outburst, Qingtong took an involuntary step back and froze. He couldn’t believe Mo Tianliao had yelled at him over an artifact he had forged for someone else. He turned and briskly left the furnace chamber.

Mo Tianliao expended a lot of effort to absorb the divine soul back. Opening his eyes, he wiped the cold sweat from his forehead. His spiritual energy was already depleted, and any additional effort made his vision go dark. He swallowed a vital energy-restoring pill and absorbed spiritual energy from a spiritual stone to muster up enough strength to repair the damaged Ninesouls Crystal.

Fortunately, it was just a crack. Although the divine soul had leaked out, the spell arrays within were still intact. Mo Tianliao fetched some other materials to patch up the external flaws, restoring it to its original state in no time.

“I hate to be the one reminding you, my master,” the tortoiseshell mouth said, clicking a tortoiseshell tongue at him, “but you scared Kittycat away just now. If you don’t appease him right away, you can forget about getting into bed tonight.”

Only then did Mo Tianliao remember that he’d lost his temper at his master just now. He smacked his forehead and dashed out…only to collapse at the doorway. Having just forged an artifact and strained his divine soul, Mo Tianliao was completely sapped of energy. If he had a pillow, he would have fallen asleep on the spot.

He patted his cheeks to wake himself up and swallowed an elixir from his inventory bracelet. The strength returned to his body, and he quickly stood up and hurried toward Qingning Palace.

“What’s wrong with him?” Mo Tianliao asked Taishi on the way there. The cat hadn’t kept him company while he was busy forging the last

fortnight or so, and when they met, he'd thrown a tantrum and flung things around. There had to be a reason for it.

"Since when does a cat need a reason to get angry?" Taishi gloated and launched into a melodious, sorrowful tune he'd picked up from somewhere. *"O, mine husband's heart doth stray afar, nevermore to return.* O woe is me, what's a hapless wife to do…"

"Shut up!" Mo Tianliao rubbed his temples. His head was throbbing dully. He was a demon lord; his temper wasn't particularly good. All his patience and tenderness was reserved for his cat. He'd be lying if he said he wasn't angry about what happened today. His Feline Lordship was really getting too spoiled. The hit the Ninesouls Crystal had taken had given him a headache, and he was worried something might have also happened to Qingtong.

He paused for a moment outside Qingning Palace before walking in, mocking himself for his predictable soft spot as he pushed open the door to the inner chamber.

The door was ajar, with no protective barrier erected. Entering quietly, Mo Tianliao saw the figure lying on the bed, but his back was to him; he couldn't see his face. He assumed Qingtong was sulking. Climbing onto the bed, Mo Tianliao pursed his lips, held his master by the shoulders, and slowly leaned over. "About just now—Qingtong!" His intent to appease the cat was immediately abandoned. He quickly cradled him in his arms and anxiously cupped the pale face with one hand. "What's wrong? Does it hurt?"

"Ugh…" Long eyelashes trembled and fluttered open. Large beads of sweat rolled down his face. Qingtong's lips parted, but all that escaped was a soft moan of pain. His hands clutched at the bedsheet so tightly that his veins bulged.

Oh no. The hit from just now must have affected Qingtong's divine soul.

Qingtong was in such pain that he couldn't see clearly, but he could sense Mo Tianliao's presence. This man had scooped him up and taken him in when he was still little. He'd given him delicious food and fun toys, let him scratch and bite, and opened his collar for him on cold nights, hugging him close while he slept. This affection was something his master and

seniors could never give him. To a kitten who'd just lost his parents, this man with a silly smile had been his whole world.

He had never imagined that there would come a day when Mo Tianliao would stop doting on him. He knew Mo Tianliao liked fluffy things, but that was all it was—he liked them. Pawpaw knew that to Mo Tianliao, those little creatures couldn't be compared to him. When he'd learned that Mo Tianliao was going to forge an artifact for Shuangren, he was a bit bothered, but not particularly angry.

But this time, it felt different. He hadn't asked for remuneration, and he'd spent ten days working himself to exhaustion crafting that thing. What was more, he wouldn't let Qingtong touch the pendant—he'd even lost his temper with him.

Feeling a sudden stab of pain in his heart, Qingtong had quickly left the furnace chamber, unable to bring himself to stay there for another second. He didn't want to see Mo Tianliao's enraged face at all.

"Go…go away," Qingtong said, his voice trembling as he pushed him away.

Mo Tianliao's heart was aching too terribly to listen to him. He reached into his inventory bracelet for a soul-condensing pill, but Qingtong kept struggling, making it hard for him to grab his wrist.

"Ugh…" When he finally managed to grab his wrist, Qingtong cried out in pain and clutched his head with both hands.

"Qingtong, Qingtong!" Mo Tianliao hugged him tight. "It's all right. Don't be afraid. I'm here."

"It hurts…so much…" Already becoming delirious, Qingtong leaned into the familiar embrace and cried out, his voice so weak it sounded like a plea for help. Mo Tianliao's heart almost broke. He was about to carry him to the sect leader when Qingtong wrapped his arms around his neck and pressed his bloodless lips firmly against his own.

Mo Tianliao froze in place, his eyes widening as he watched the gorgeous man in his arms nuzzle messily against his lips. His mind went blank. Gingerly tightening his arms around the person awkwardly trying to kiss him, Mo Tianliao cradled the back of his head with a hand and kissed back deeply.

A sweet taste lingered between their lips; the light, cool touch was intoxicating. The soft moans that escaped between each breath were driving him crazy. After allowing himself a small taste to take the edge off his aroused desire, Mo Tianliao forcibly reined himself in and reminded himself that the man in his arms was in pain, and he couldn't jeopardize him while he indulged in his own pleasure.

Just as he was about to tear himself away, he heard a contented purr escape from Qingtong's throat. He was stunned. The tense body in his arms gradually relaxed, becoming so comfortable he went limp.

What was going on? Could kissing relieve pain? Shocked by his own absurd thoughts, Mo Tianliao gradually pulled away, but those lips followed after his just like the last time.

It seemed kissing really could relieve pain! He couldn't believe his luck. Mixed feelings welled up in him. All sorts of thoughts flooded his mind.

He's my cat. Taking advantage of his instincts like this seems wrong…

He's my shizun. Taking liberties with him like this is probably blasphemous…

But even Buddhist cultivators wouldn't be able to resist a temptation like this…

Then again, I like him, and I have no intention of resisting…

Will he claw me to shreds when he wakes up…

Eventually, all his thoughts shattered away, leaving only one: *I'd be an idiot if I pass up such an opportunity!*

Mo Tianliao gave in to his nature as a demonic cultivator and did as he wished. With the gorgeous man in his arms, he fell back onto the soft bed and kissed those sweet lips, stroked his soft hair.

Due to the instability of Qingtong's divine soul, his originally black hair had turned snow-white. It spread out wide behind his head, framing those clear eyes like light-colored glass, so breathtakingly beautiful it was ethereal.

As Mo Tianliao took liberties with his master, he massaged Qingtong's head to ease his pain.

Taishi quietly transformed into a candlestick by the bedside, pretending to be inanimate. No matter how tactless he was, he knew to shut up at times like this. If he startled the two and they snapped back to their senses, what awaited him would be a double trial of ice and fire.

Since the day Mo Tianliao had begun forging him in his demon palace, the kittycat had often spat ice shards at him. At that time, he was only a fragile spiritual intelligence that Mo Tianliao had just extracted from nature's treasures. He was very fragile, okay?! And it hurt to get frozen. Even though he had an indestructible shell now, he still feared this kitty's ice shards.

As for woodfire… Taishi shed a drop of tortoiseshell melted wax. Discussing that would only bring heartache.

"Mm…" With their lips touching, the intense headache was instantly relieved, and as the kiss deepened, Qingtong seemed to be able to connect to the missing part of his divine soul. The feeling of a reunion long overdue was truly wonderful. Gradually, Qingtong regained his senses and realized what he was doing, but instead of pushing Mo Tianliao away, he let him do as he pleased—partly because he had no strength, and partly because it felt too good.

Mo Tianliao saw those eyes open and look quietly at him, his gaze clear, and realized his master had come to. And he was even allowing him to keep going!

Mo Tianliao felt a fire ignite in him, burning all his rationality to ashes. As the kisses deepened, his hand that had been stroking his master's hair slid down and slipped into the snow-white collar.

"Um!" Qingtong's eyes widened. What was this fellow doing?! He was furless now, and Mo Tianliao still dared to grope around?! Slowly, he raised his hand to the side and flashed five glinting claws.

"Ouch! Ow, ow, ow!" The moment of shared intimacy ended with a tragic cry from Mo Tianliao.

Taishi flew over and transformed into a pile of tortoiseshell wood shavings, expressing deep sympathy and solidarity for his master. Touched

by the gesture, Mo Tianliao gave him a fireball as a thank-you gift.

“Yow! Ow, ow, ow! Hot!” Taishi flew away in a huff and landed on the windowsill, where it turned into a tortoiseshell flower shedding a few petals, acting fragile.

Mo Tianliao touched the white scratches on his face and neck and looked at the silent Qingtong, who had his back to him. He scooted across the bedsheet and hugged him from behind. “Does it still hurt?”

Qingtong raised his hand in silence, claws still out.

Mo Tianliao awkwardly withdrew his hands, took the newly crafted Ninesouls Crystal pendant out from his sleeve, and held it out to Qingtong. “Here, wear this. I’ve reabsorbed the divine soul that was in there, so no need to worry about it breaking.” He’d been so focused on mending his divine soul that he’d forgotten this gorgeous man was a restless feline lordship. Even a slight bump or knock could be dangerous. He was still feeling anxious about what had happened earlier, and now he didn’t dare to put the divine soul back into it.

Qingtong looked at the pendant and blinked. This was for him? Slowly, he reached out and grasped it. “Didn’t you craft this for Shuangren?”

“Huh?” The question came so out of the blue that Mo Tianliao was momentarily dumbfounded. A long while later, it finally hit him, and his lips gradually spread into a wide grin. He cleared his throat and took out a drab gray sphere from his inventory bracelet. “This is for Shuangren. He gave me the Shielding Silver, so I had to keep my word.”

Qingtong glanced at the orb. The shielding silver on it had been applied casually and looked messy, while the crystal was simply and crudely cut—there were even some edges exposed. Satisfied, he tucked the pendant under his pillow and buried half of his face into the soft pillow.

Mo Tianliao lay behind him and watched a pair of snowy, furry ears pop out from his head, gradually turning pink.

“I’m tired. You can leave now,” Qingtong said languidly. His clear, melodious voice was still cold and dignified, though those furry ears kept blushing and fidgeting.

Feeling an itch in his nose, Mo Tianliao quickly covered it and recited the Heart-Purifying Mantra. He pulled over a thin blanket to cover Qingtong. Not planning to leave, however, he reached out and took the gorgeous, hard-to-please man into his arms.

“You…” Qingtong turned to glare at him, only to be met with a light peck at the corner of his lips. The ears on his head promptly flattened, although his expression was still as indifferent as ever.

Mo Tianliao’s stomach hurt from holding back his laughter. Disregarding Qingtong’s glare, he wrapped his legs around him and touched that incomparably handsome profile. “Be good. I’m exhausted too. I spent ten days forging, and then you dropped my divine soul. I can barely move now. Let’s sleep together for a while.”

MINI EXTRA

The Little Mermaid: Kitty Edition

Tianlang (Witch-Dog): Have you decided whether or not you’ll become a human? If he doesn’t love you…

Pawpaw (Prince Cat): I’ve decided, no matter the price I have to pay.

Woodworker (Human Prince): Oh, my love, what price did you pay?

Pawpaw: If you stop loving me, you will turn into wood shavings.

Woodworker: …Wait, what?

Chapter 56:
Secret Arts

"DIVINE SOUL?" Qingtong pushed at him, but didn't manage to move him. When he heard that, though, he reflexively looked up at him. No wonder it had hurt earlier. This dumbass had incorporated their divine souls into the pendant.

The soft, paw-like hand with its long, slender fingers pressed feebly against his chest. Mo Tianliao couldn't resist taking it into his hands to fiddle with. "I extracted a wisp of divine soul and put it in, thinking you could try wearing it and see if it helps."

"Dummy." Qingtong pursed his lips. "If it were that simple, I'd have taken your divine soul out ages ago."

"Would you really?" Mo Tianliao leaned in and nuzzled his forehead against his. "I went without sleep for ten days just to craft this for you. You might feel better now, but my head still hurts."

The furry ears swiveled. Qingtong lowered his gaze and said nothing.

Mo Tianliao smiled and pulled him into his arms again. "So kissing can cure headaches, hmm? Next time it hurts, tell me right away." This was more effective than the soul-condensing pill. Perhaps with a few more kisses, his precious snowball's divine soul might even heal a little.

"Insolent disciple…" Qingtong glared at him. He wanted to ask why Mo Tianliao had kissed him again, but asking a question like that sounded a bit silly, so he pursed his lips and didn't ask.

The exchange earlier had drained both of them, and as Qingtong listened to Mo Tianliao chatter, he fell asleep.

Mo Tianliao looked down at him. The color had returned to his pale face, and his thin lips were a little red and swollen. He caressed those lips with his fingers, finding it hard to imagine how he'd survived the pain over the past three hundred years. Did he bite those beautiful lips until they bled? Had the pain driven him to hurt himself?

“Mm…” Qingtong, docile in his sleep, snuggled closer and rested his cheek against Mo Tianliao’s chest with a contented purr.

Mo Tianliao couldn’t live without this cat. Likewise, the cat couldn’t be without him. Mo Tianliao hugged the man in his arms tightly and dropped a light kiss on one furry ear. The sensitive ears trembled, and the fur tickled Mo Tianliao’s chin, making him chuckle.

He couldn’t believe this silly cat had gotten angry because he misunderstood who the pendant was for. A cat’s jealousy was truly something else… Mo Tianliao stroked the long, snowy hair, wondering if he could harbor any hope that his cat had feelings for him too but just hadn’t realized it.

Mo Tianliao was actually a stubborn person. When he was a demonic cultivator, he’d been obsessed with crafting artifacts. His cultivation path was artifact forging, which let him forge artifacts while he cultivated with no interference. He was also interested in precious materials and novel refining methods, so a piece of Meteorfall Stone would please him far more than ten beauties.

He adored small furry creatures, and he always wanted to pet and hug them whenever he saw them—though his favorite was his own Feline Lordship, of course. He liked him so much that he gave him all that was good in the world and pampered him unreservedly. When Mo Tianliao found out that his master was his cat, he naturally doted on Qingtong unconditionally. His obsessive affection had long surpassed the boundary between master and spirit beast. It didn’t hurt that this was a guy so breathtakingly gorgeous that no mortal could resist him.

They slept in each other’s embrace for a day and a night.

Mo Tianliao woke up to the sunlight and yawned. Looking down, he found Qingtong still nestled in his arms, his fair, handsome face flushed pink with warmth and sleep. Not having the heart to wake him up, Mo Tianliao stayed still and lost himself in contemplation.

He’d been so busy lately that he hadn’t had a chance to organize his thoughts. The demon lord named Xiang seemed to have taken a big slice of the demonic path’s power pie. Mo Tianliao wondered where his former subordinates were now. He’d given it some thought in those three centuries he was adrift. For the others to breach his layers of spell arrays when they

attacked his Duantian demon palace, there had to have been a traitor on the inside, and it couldn't have just been one person.

"Master, master!" An excited voice called out to him in his mind. Mo Tianliao looked up and saw, floating in the air…a tortoiseshell-colored jade phallus.

A vein on Mo Tianliao's temple throbbed. As the man in his arms was still asleep, Mo Tianliao replied to Taishi with his divine sense, "Why are you in this form again?"

"IIIIII've figured out a way to mend the kitty's divine soul!" The jade phallus circled Mo Tianliao's head.

"What is it?" Mo Tianliao asked urgently, disregarding Taishi's appearance.

"See what I look like now?" The tortoiseshell-colored jade phallus landed on a pillow and wiggled. "This is the answer!"

Mo Tianliao stared at him.

"Don't get it?" Taishi hopped onto the blanket. "Your kiss can ease his pain, which means your divine souls can connect through physical contact. *The way of Heaven takes from what is in excess to make whole what is in dearth*—your divine soul is in surplus, but the cat doesn't have enough."

Mo Tianliao furrowed his brows slightly. Dual cultivation was indeed a path where both cultivators could complement each other's cultivation, but he'd never heard of it working on divine souls. Some demonic cultivators did practice dual cultivation with their evolved demonic companions to soothe their inner demons, though…

"Ordinary dual cultivation won't work, of course. That's where I come in!" The jade phallus wiggled its head.

Mo Tianliao's expression promptly darkened. "Don't even think about it! If you dare touch him, I'll make beef slices out of you!"

"Oh my, what are you thinking?" Taishi thoughtfully transformed into a beef pizzle before breaking off into slices and arranging itself into a row. "I'm saying you need to use the ancient great spirits' secret art for dual cultivation in order for your divine souls to fuse together."

Legend had it that when the great ancient spirits joined in union, it wasn’t just their bodies that merged as one, but their divine souls too.

After a moment of silence, Mo Tianliao looked down at the soundly sleeping man in his arms. Dual cultivation, huh…? He swallowed. He had no issue with doing that kind of thing, but his cat was still innocent about such matters, and it didn’t feel right to use something like *this* as an excuse to start sleeping with him. What if it skewed Qingtong’s perception of love?

“I understand,” said Mo Tianliao. “Give me the dual cultivation technique.” The row of beef slices promptly unsliced itself and enthusiastically stuck the result to Mo Tianliao’s forehead, only to be grabbed by his master and forcibly turned into a brick.

Qingtong opened his eyes to find Mo Tianliao smacking a tortoiseshell brick against his own head.

At the moment of contact, Taishi transmitted the secret technique. The ancient spirits’ dual cultivation secret art wasn’t complicated, but it contained many archaic phrases that were hard to recite and would take time to decipher.

“Any alternative methods?” Mo Tianliao tossed the brick into the air, but instead of changing form, Taishi kept his shape and fell despondently onto the blanket. But he sprang back up at his question.

“Isn’t this good enough? It even means you’ll get to…ehe he heh…” Taishi snickered wickedly.

Mo Tianliao glared at him. “Just in case!”

“Oh, good point.” Taishi the Brick pondered this for a moment. “For divine soul fusion, besides dual cultivation, there is one other method—crafting a spirit connection artifact to contain both of your divine souls.”

A spirit connection artifact capable of holding divine souls—Mo Tianliao had never heard of such a thing in all his two lifetimes. He picked up the brick to have him transmit the method over.

“What are you doing?” chimed a clear voice with a hint of laziness and curiosity.

Mo Tianliao, still holding up the brick, turned stiffly and to meet pair of glass-clear eyes filled with disdain. He casually tossed the brick under the bed and smiled as he planted a kiss on the smooth forehead. “My darling, you’re awake.”

The furry ears froze for a moment, then flushed faintly pink, though Qingtong’s expression was one of scorn. “Idiot.” Hitting himself with a brick—ever since that stupid artifact had come to life, this man had gotten dumber too.

“Ha ha. Taishi found a way to repair the divine soul.” Mo Tianliao blinked, desperately fighting the urge to pinch those furry ears. Qingtong might lose his temper if he realized he’d revealed his ears.

“Is that so…” Qingtong yawned, not all that concerned, and rolled over to go back to sleep.

“You’ve slept for a day and a night; you can’t sleep anymore.” Mo Tianliao sat up and took him into his arms, soft and pliant from sleep. “Didn’t the sect leader say we need to attend the Three Sects’ Grand Summit? When are we going?”

“It hasn’t been decided yet.” Qingtong reached for the purple pendant under his pillow. “How do I use this?”

Mo Tianliao took his hand, reached into the inventory bracelet, and took out a silver chain. He’d made it for his cat in the past to hang a bell on it, but the cat had found it too noisy and refused to let him put it on.

He threaded the chain through a tiny hole in the pendant and put it on for him. The light purple crystal looked good hanging against his fair collarbone, but it was rather conspicuous. Mo Tianliao admired it for a moment before lengthening the chain so that the pendant was hidden under Qingtong’s clothes.

“This can defend against the Spirit-Disciplining Horn and nurture your divine soul,” Mo Tianliao explained, one hand holding the pendant while the other sneakily caressed Qingtong’s supple waist. “See this opening? Once Huaqing designs a liquid version of the soul-condensing pill, we can place it in here to release it slowly.”

Qingtong lazily hummed in acknowledgment. As long as Mo Tianliao was around, he didn’t feel the need to think too hard. Actually, he hadn’t really paid attention to a single thing Mo Tianliao had said; Mo Tianliao could remember it himself.

Now that they’d both slept their fill, they walked out of the inner chamber, and Qingtong shook his head, turning his hair black. His furry ears vanished with a poof.

The attendants in white stepped forward to help him wash up. “Xuanji-zhenren came by earlier.”

Qingtong raised an eyebrow, put down the towel, and walked out of his palace. There, in the bamboo pavilion, was a black tortoise shell about a foot square, basking contentedly in the sun.

Mo Tianliao looked at it curiously. The strange patterns on the shell were exactly the same as the one he'd seen in the lake in Woxuan Sanctum, but this one was much smaller. This shell seemed to be empty, though.

Qingtong walked over and kicked it. "What do you want?"

A black snake poked its head out of the shell and looked around. Noticing Mo Tianliao standing nearby, it froze for a moment before retreating inside in embarrassment.

The gorgeous man in white transformed into a cat and sprang onto the shell, reaching his paw into the shell to swat around. "Coward!"

Chapter 57:
Candidate

BEHOLD THE XUANWU, of tortoise and snake, one of the four divine beasts of ancient times!

Astonished, Mo Tianliao looked at the black snake that the cat had dragged out. He really hadn't expected Xuanji-zhenren would turn out to be the black tortoise known as Xuanwu, the sacred beast, especially as he looked nothing like the legends.

The black snake had a ferocious-looking triangular head that could completely separate from the shell. He'd only just crawled out when the cat bit down on his vulnerable spot.

"Don't bite! Your disciple's watching!" the snake hissed, his long tail slapping against the bamboo pavilion, but the cat wouldn't budge. Left with no choice, he transformed into human form in a flash of light.

A glum-looking Xuanji-zhenren, dressed in an all-black cultivator robe, stood before Mo Tianliao with a cat hanging from his neck, refusing to let go.

Fighting back his laughter, Mo Tianliao pried his cat off him. "Greetings, Shishu."

Xuanji touched his neck gingerly, then picked up the shell from the ground and tucked it into his robes. The soft fabric instantly gained a layer of leather armor connected at the joints.

The cat jumped to the ground and transformed into Qingtong-zhenren. "What brings you here?" This second senior of his was a reclusive person. He wouldn't just drop by without a reason.

"Uh, as you know, the Three Sects' Grand Summit is just around the corner." Xuanji clasped his hands together and lowered his head to deliberate for a moment. "I don't want to go. Can you take my disciples instead?"

The Three Sects' Grand Summit was a grand event with various competitions and generous prizes. For cultivators, it was an excellent opportunity for learning and gaining experience. Apart from the sect hosting the event, the other sects' leaders each typically sent one or two elders at the soul transformation stage instead of attending themselves.

Woyun Sect didn't have many elders; other than the sect leader, there were only the two of them. There were a few old spirits guarding the mountains, but they rarely ventured out.

Qingtong glanced at his second senior. "I can take them, provided they are willing to come with me."

Xuanji blinked. He'd completely forgotten that that might be an issue. But it was no big deal, as long as Qingtong agreed. He could handle his own disciples. If they refused, he'd just beat them up.

So, Xuanji happily left, leaving Qingtong the gift of a tray of hemp rope he'd just braided.

Qingtong turned to sit in the rocking chair, only to find his insolent disciple already lounging there and looking at him with a smile.

"Get up!" Qingtong walked over and kicked the calf of this audacious disciple who dared take his master's throne.

Mo Tianliao refused and patted his lap. "Come sit here. I'll be your cushion."

He was actually just joking, and he was waiting for His Feline Lordship to toss him onto the ground when, to his surprise, Qingtong looked at him and then plopped down onto his lap, leaning his entire body against Mo Tianliao's with his head resting against his chest and the soft crown of his hair brushing against his chin. Mo Tianliao found himself enveloped by the scent of sunshine on Qingtong's warm body.

Tentatively, Mo Tianliao wrapped his arms lightly around him. He felt his body growing hot and his throat becoming parched, but he couldn't bear to let go, so he cleared his throat and tried to distract himself with conversation. "So, Xuanji-zhenren is a Black Tortoise, one of the four divine beasts."

"Yeah," Qingtong replied lazily. "I'm also a divine beast."

“Which one?” Mo Tianliao smiled, holding one of Qingtong’s hands and playing with it. How could such a tiny fluffball be a divine beast? A cat god?

“White Tiger.” Qingtong tugged away his hand and placed it down over Mo Tianliao’s hand.

Mo Tianliao put his hand over that fair hand instead, only for Qingtong to put his hand over his, and so the two started playing a silly game of “whose paw is on top.” Qingtong’s reply made Mo Tianliao pause, though.

“White Tiger?” He was clearly a pure white cat. How could he be a white tiger? If he was a tiger cub, where were his stripes?

“What? You don’t believe me?” He turned his hand over and extended five sharp claws.

“I believe you, of course.” Mo Tianliao chuckled dryly. He knew that legends often differed from reality, but this was such a big discrepancy…

According to legend, after heaven and earth were created, the azure dragon, the vermilion bird, the white tiger, and the black tortoise guarded the four cardinal directions, protecting the still unstable realm and slaying all monsters from beyond. One could easily imagine just how magnificent a world that would have been, with massive dragons swirling among the clouds and phoenixes soaring through the skies, so the four beasts ought to be incredibly ferocious.

Imagine if monsters from beyond barged in only to see a palm-sized white tiger with no stripes, or a black tortoise whose shell had dropped while it was running…

“The four beasts actually have their own tribes, but too many of them died in ancient times, and by the time of the great war between the immortals and demons, there were barely any left—not counting those who had ascended. Now there’s probably only one left of each.” Qingtong yawned. It had already been late in the morning when they woke up, and now it was almost high noon, when the sun was cozily warm. It was making him sleepy.

“Then your parents…” Mo Tianliao took out a thin blanket from the inventory bracelet and covered him with it. It was nearly late autumn, so

even though it was midday, the wind was still a little chilly.

“Dead,” Qingtong responded simply, and he lightly closed his eyes. Mo Tianliao fell silent, but Qingtong knew he was overthinking again when he felt his arms tightening around him. Mo Tianliao had told him about his own past back at the demon palace. “I’m not as unfortunate as you,” Qingtong told him. “I never met them. I was still an egg when it happened.”

All spirit beasts were born from eggs, even white tigers. As Qingtong’s parents had perished, his master had been the one who’d hatched him.

“How about the azure dragon and vermilion bird?” Mo Tianliao asked offhandedly, wondering if those two also defied expectations.

Qingtong turned his face and nuzzled against Mo Tianliao’s chest. “The azure dragon is still alive, but I’ve never seen the vermilion bird.” He yawned again and began to doze off.

“How are you sleepy again when you just woke up?” Mo Tianliao reached for the tray of hemp rope by his feet. “We can make something bigger with this much rope. Which would you prefer? A swing or a cat tree?”

“A swing that comes with a cat tree.” Qingtong scratched the frayed end of the rope.

“Shizun, Shizun!” Menghu called out as he came running over; he’d just returned. “The sect leader—” He froze, his words cut short. What was this he was seeing?! His master lying on top on his junior! His master often slept on him too, but this felt different somehow… He couldn’t quite put his finger on it.

Qingtong eyed his dumb disciple. “Stop making a ruckus. What a disgrace.”

Menghu scratched his head and got straight to business. “The sect leader has sent Moxiong to bring Langzi back.”

Langzi was Tianlang-zhenren’s youngest disciple—and his son. He’d left him to be raised by his own master, although occasionally he’d take him back to the sect. By their calculations, the child’s form should be stable enough by now for him to live permanently at Woyun Sect.

Qingtong hummed an acknowledgment and ignored his eldest disciple's expectant eyes.

"Shizun, I want to go too. I haven't met Shizu yet." Menghu squatted beside the rocking chair, clinging to Qingtong's knees, and made eyes at his junior beside his master.

Mo Tianliao raised an eyebrow—Qingtong's master was still in the mortal world?

Qingtong smacked his stupid disciple. "You'll be coming with me to the Three Sects' Grand Summit."

It was unusual for cultivators to part from their spiritual companions for too long. The Three Sects' Grand Summit lasted two months, so high-level cultivators naturally brought their spiritual companions along. And Qingtong-zhenren had always claimed that his spiritual companion was a tiger.

Menghu deflated. Head drooping, he turned to leave, but then he remembered something and turned back to hand Mo Tianliao a small inventory pouch. "Shidi, here's the money from the sale of that spiritual sword."

"Thank you." Mo Tianliao took it with a smile and shoved it into his inventory bracelet. Then he went back to hugging his master's waist and playing "paw on top" with him.

After instructing Menghu to prepare the stuff they needed to bring, Qingtong dismissed him.

It was only when Menghu walked out of the bamboo grove that he realized what was wrong. When he was his master's cushion, he had to be careful not to move, or he'd get beaten up. It was a thankless task, but his junior had looked so delighted he was grinning from ear to ear. Ah, youth, always so full of energy. Well, he'd learn just how much hard work it actually was with more experience under his belt.

Menghu left with his hands clasped behind his back, like a man with wisdom beyond his years.

***

THE NEXT DAY, Mo Tianliao was dispatched by his master to Woxuan Sanctum to ask about the candidates who would be accompanying his master to the Three Sects' Grand Summit.

Woxuan Sanctum was silent as the grave. Only Xuanji was sitting out in the waterside pavilion, braiding hemp rope all by his lonesome.

"Shishu." Mo Tianliao walked over to greet him, his lips twitching at the sight of the hemp rope coiled all over the ground. Xuanji's weird hobby was truly beyond him. "Shizun sent me to ask who is willing to accompany him to the Three Sects' Grand Summit."

Xuanji frowned. Those three wayward disciples of his had fled as soon as he told them about it yesterday. He stood up and whistled at the lake, and the waters rippled as a turtle shell slowly emerged, followed by a head.

A multicolored butterfly the size of two palms fluttered over and landed on the sea turtle's head, letting the turtle ferry him to the waterside pavilion.

"Where's Yuli?" Xuanji glared at the turtle with a butterfly hat. "Your junior from Woqing Sanctum is here. Look at yourselves. Disgraceful."

A large silver carp leaped out of the water and transformed into Yuli, Xuanji's third disciple. "I'm here, Shizun," he said as he landed on the waterside pavilion.

Mo Tianliao looked at them impassively. His cat had told him about the various creatures in the sect yesterday. The sea turtle should be Yuanhai, Xuanji's head disciple—the fellow who was always slowly reading books at the Blessed Sanctuary of Ten Thousand Scrolls. The butterfly had to be Huaqing, which meant he had an opportunity to ask if the soul-condensing pill in liquid form was ready. As for Yuli, it was obvious enough. Seeing how terrified he'd been of Qingtong, Mo Tianliao had guessed that he was either a mouse or a fish.

"So, what are your decisions on the matter I told you about yesterday?" Xuanji stood beside the pavilion with his hands behind his back.

The butterfly flew over and circled around him twice. He tried to speak, but unfortunately butterflies couldn't talk, so he reluctantly transformed into his human form. "Shizun, I have to go, or I won't be able to get good prices for my elixirs in the future. However…" He was an elixirist, so he had to take part in the elixir-concocting competition at the grand summit. Elixirs were like magical artifacts—the more renowned the elixirist, the higher the prices they could fetch.

Xuanji nodded. At least his second disciple had his priorities right.

"But I'm worried that Shishu will squash me before we even reach Liuyun Sect." Huaqing crouched on the ground and held his head. Of his fellow disciples, he was the only one who had to attend. But going with Qingtong was just too dangerous.

Xuanji furrowed his brows. "Useless. How about you, Yuanhai?"

Yuanhai crawled up and drawled, "Shishu despises me for not being able to take off my shell and constantly tries to pry it off me." He shrank his head back, preferring to skip going than be alone with Qingtong.

The corner of Mo Tianliao's lips twitched. Getting secondhand embarrassment, Xuanji shouted, "Yuli, you—"

"Shizun!" Yuli didn't even wait for him to finish. Falling to his knees, he hugged his master's legs and pleaded, "You can't send me to my death!"

The three disciples broke out crying in unison, making quite the tragic sight indeed.

"Well, then, I'll come again tomorrow." Mo Tianliao struggled to control his twitching lips as he bowed and took his leave.

MINI EXTRA

Woodworker: What kinds of creatures do we have in the sect?

Pawpaw: Food and toys.

Woodworker: What kind of food?

Pawpaw: Fish and turtle from Woxuan Sanctum.

Woodworker: …And the toys?

Pawpaw: The furry cushion from Wotian Sanctum and the butterfly from Woxuan Sanctum.

Woodworker: *speechless*

Tianlang and Xuanji: QAQ

Chapter 58:
Provocation

THE GRAND SUMMIT was just around the corner. Anyone in Woyun Sect at the foundation establishment stage and above was eligible to take part, but the limited slots meant they had to be selective. The two elders could designate a disciple at the core formation stage and above to accompany them, while the rest had to compete in an internal match; the winners would get to go.

Menghu had to play the role of his master's spiritual companion, so he automatically had to attend and didn't count for one of their slots; thus, Woqing Sanctum's spot naturally fell to Mo Tianliao.

"Look, it's the guy from Woqing Sanctum." Mo Tianliao heard whispering behind him when he went to the sect's Chamber of Administrative Affairs to collect the resources for Woqing Sanctum.

"That's the talent Qingtong-zhenren took in last year?" someone asked enviously. "I heard he formed his core in just two years."

"Tch, he was already at the final level of the qi-refining stage when he joined the sect," someone said in hushed tones. "As for his core formation…I heard Woqing Sanctum played it up just so he can take part in this grand summit."

"Huh?" The disciple beside him was astounded. "You can fake that?"

Cheng Xi, who had been sent here on an errand, overheard this and wholeheartedly agreed. As someone with a heaven spiritual attribute, he hadn't even established his foundation yet, so how could Mo Tianliao, a disciple with dual spiritual attributes, have already formed his core? What a joke!

When Mo Tianliao stepped out of the Chamber of Administrative Affairs, he was intercepted by Cheng Xi. "Cheng-shidi, what can I do for you?" he said with a gentle smile.

“Wh-what did you call me?” Cheng Xi was displeased. “I joined the sect before you.”

Mo Tianliao raised an eyebrow. They’d joined on the same day, so he wasn’t all that much earlier—an incense stick’s time at most. Besides, they had different masters, and Mo Tianliao’s cultivation was two whole stages higher; it wasn’t inappropriate to address him as his junior.

There was a wide, open space in front of the Chamber of Administrative Affairs, where the disciples had gathered in groups. Some were here to receive their assignments, while others were here to exchange items, and everyone there was slowing down and surreptitiously looking their way.

“Oh, I forgot. Cheng-shidi is currently a common disciple, so I don’t have to call you shidi,” Mo Tianliao said with a smile, feigning realization. He was fine treating a single provocation from this kind of hotheaded young man as a joke and dismissing it as youthful ignorance, but since the guy kept trying to start a fight with him, there was no need for Mo Tianliao to keep humoring him.

“You—” Cheng Xi’s face went livid with rage. His status was still undetermined, since it would only be confirmed after he’d established his foundation. By pointing it out, Mo Tianliao had hurt his feelings.

“Mo-shidi, you’re going too far.” Several common inner disciples who had joined the Blessed Sanctuary of a Thousand Sprouts earlier interjected coolly. “We are all inner disciples. Even if we can’t become personal disciples, we were still here earlier than you, and that makes us your seniors, don’t you think?”

Among the disciples who spoke up for Cheng Xi, two were already at the early core formation stage. They assumed Mo Tianliao’s core formation cultivation was a farce, that he was merely capitalizing on his master’s favor to tag along to the grand summit and broaden his horizons.

“Who do you think you are?” Mo Tianliao took his time storing away the resources he’d collected into his inventory bracelet. A flash of light glinted across the tortoiseshell bracer on his right wrist.

The disciples bristled. “The strong reign supreme on Taixuan. We may be common disciples, but our statuses are no lower than yours.”

Many common disciples around them nodded in agreement. Some even indignantly reached for their swords. There was no rule against fighting in the sect; only killing people or harming spirit beasts was forbidden.

Mo Tianliao narrowed his eyes. If he didn't teach these people a lesson today, this would just keep on happening, and more people would try to pick fights with him. He was busy; he didn't have time to waste on these young men. "The strong reign supreme, but that doesn't apply to pretenders, you know," he scoffed.

The first few who had spoken up drew their swords. "You've gone too far!" Two disciples at early core formation stage and one at complete foundation establishment stage formed a triangle formation and charged at Mo Tianliao.

Cheng Xi was forced back by the aura of the core formation cultivators. Meanwhile, those in the vicinity with insufficient cultivation quickly got out of the way.

Three spiritual swords hummed in what seemed to be a formation. Mo Tianliao raised his right hand, and his tortoiseshell bracer immediately transformed into a thin shield that met the tips of the swords head-on with a loud clang. The next instant, Mo Tianliao spun away, and the thin shield turned into a longsword. It'd been a long time since he fought with anyone. He'd actually been prepared for a fight when he went to the demon realm, but he'd never even gotten to draw his sword. It had been rather disappointing.

Mo Tianliao wasn't particularly proficient in swordplay, but he was an artificer, and that meant he knew how to wield all kinds of weapons. Cheng Xi watched them fight from behind a nearby tree. He knew that the three inner disciples were all sword cultivators, while Mo Tianliao specialized in spellcraft. Fighting them with a sword was truly unwise.

Mo Tianliao's swordplay was as mediocre as Cheng Xi expected, but Taishi was exceptionally sturdy. When the two swords clashed, his opponent's sword let out a distressed hum, whereas Taishi stood firm. Countless vines sprouted from his sword's tip and wrapped around his opponents' swords.

“Oh no!” one of them cried out, and he twirled his sword around to slash the vines to pieces. But before he could extract his blade, tiny fire snakes sprang out of the vines and lunged at them.

The trio quickly pulled back their swords. One of them had a water attribute, and he put out the fire; another slashed at the vines, while the third one attacked Mo Tianliao.

Mo Tianliao spun into the air and slashed through the air with one hand, and his longsword turned into an arrowless curved bow. He pulled back the bowstring with a hand and used his wood-element spiritual energy to conjure forth a flaming wooden arrow. Then he fired three times in succession—one aiming for the head, one targeting the heart, and one going right for the groin.

Protect the head, heart, or groin—not an easy choice to make by any means.

Startled, the guy quickly summoned his spiritual sword to block the blow. The other two rushed over to help him, but the three arrows were imbued with such great spiritual power that they were practically unstoppable. Two of them had to join forces to stop one. The unlucky guy being targeted dodged the arrow aiming for his heart, but the one going for his groin grazed past his leg and promptly set his crotch on fire.

The man screamed in alarm and rolled on the ground, while his companion hurriedly summoned a ball of water to douse him. The fire wasn’t woodfire and could be put out with water, but his entire lower body was now soaked through.

“The sect rules prohibit killing, so there’s no need for you to be so afraid, my friend,” Mo Tianliao remarked idly, clearly implying that he had wet himself out of fear.

“Ha ha ha!” A few onlookers burst out laughing.

“You—!” Seeing red, the guy charged at him recklessly.

Mo Tianliao turned his bow into a sword and met his attack head-on. Brimming with spiritual power, the divine sword Taishi cleaved his opponent’s sword into two with a single slash. Meanwhile, the other two seized their chance to attack him from behind.

As a disciple at early core formation stage, he would have stood no chance against the trio, but he had already perfectly mastered spellcraft, so as long as he had enough spiritual energy, dealing with these three was child's play. The key was to end the fight quickly before his spiritual energy was depleted.

Powerful fire-based spiritual energy formed a flame-colored barrier to shield his back. With a quick turn of his hand, he transformed his sword into a broadsword and swung it horizontally at his attackers' heads.

One of them sprang back up, while the other ducked to dodge the blow. Mo Tianliao swept his leg out to kick the one who'd ducked in the face, then struck him hard with the back of his blade. This cultivator was at the foundation establishment stage, so the discrepancy between his cultivation and Mo Tianliao's was huge to begin with. Mo Tianliao's blow promptly sent him flying like a kite with its string cut.

The other cultivator stood on his spiritual sword in midair. Mo Tianliao raised his hand, turning Taishi into a long spear, and hurled it at him. The guy scoffed. What a joke to be throwing a spear; he only had to dodge slightly to avoid it. But the spear seemed to have a mind of its own: It swerved around him to stab him in the butt. Startled, the guy tried to dodge, but Mo Tianliao flew up on a spiritual sword and struck him in the chest with a palm.

The one remaining cultivator hadn't been expecting Mo Tianliao to have another spiritual sword. He was caught off guard and coughed up blood.

All three were now down for the count. Mo Tianliao recalled Taishi, who was still raring to go, and nonchalantly flicked the imaginary dust off his collar. "Preach about the strong reigning supreme again when you can actually defeat me one-on-one." With that, he left without so much as a glance back.

"Wow! Mo-shishu is so amazing!"

"One against three!"

"Who says he's just capitalizing on his shizun's protection? He's clearly an expert among experts!"

Several female disciples looked at him with starry eyes. The man in black, flowing robes had fought one against three so smoothly, without so much as a stray hair. Add that extraordinarily handsome face into the mix, and they could hardly tear their eyes away.

***

MO TIANLIAO HURRIED BACK to Woqing Sanctum and slumped to the ground as soon as he stepped through the gate. At the core formation stage, his spiritual energy was still way too low. He was completely drained.

“Why did it take you so long just to collect something?” A pair of snow-white brocade boots appeared before him. Mo Tianliao looked up to see his master frowning at him, his cold eyes full of disdain.

Mo Tianliao hugged those long, slender legs. “Your disciple was bullied, and now I can’t walk anymore.”

Qingtong crouched and prodded Mo Tianliao’s head with a finger. “Is there anyone in this sect who could possibly manage to bully you?”

“Why wouldn’t there be?” Mo Tianliao sat up and leaned in so that their noses touched. “You, for one.”

Qingtong looked at him, opened his mouth, and bit.

“Yeouch!”

Mo Tianliao didn’t have to participate in the internal competition, so he idled around with his master in the sanctum until the day of departure. In the end, Xuanji couldn’t convince his disciples, so he had to go with them himself.

The two sanctum-masters and over thirty elite disciples boarded the sect’s flying ship, bade farewell to the sect leader, and set off for Liuyun Sect.

The flying ship was huge and divided into three levels. The first level was a common area, the second contained the disciples’ resting quarters,

and the third was for the two sanctum-masters' bedrooms, along with an observation deck that was off-limits to common disciples.

The observation deck was covered in thick, soft cushions. A tiger lay on them, snoring soundly, and the beautiful man in white leaned against the tiger with his eyes half closed, basking in the sun.

Xuanji-zhenren sat at one end of the cushions, concentrating on braiding a hemp rope. The rabbit—his fur back to its usual white—squatted behind his shishu, focused on gnawing one end of the braided rope.

Mo Tianliao walked out onto the deck with one hand holding up the marten that had been caught stealing food in the kitchen and his other hand carrying a plate of small fried fish. He sat down on a cushion and looked around. Of Woxuan Sanctum, Yuanhai hadn't come along, while Huaqing and Yuli were in hiding somewhere.

"Second Shibo, the elders of the various sects will bring their spiritual companions. If they ask, who should I say is your spiritual companion?" a curious Mo Tianliao asked as he fed his master a fish. They needed to get their story straight in advance.

"This." Xuanji took a tortoise shell out from his robe and pointed to it.

MINI EXTRA

Elder A: Xuanji, what is your spiritual companion?

Xuanji: (Takes out the shell) This. Black Spiritual Tortoise.

Elder B: Why won't it come out?

Xuanji: It's…uh, shy.

Chapter 59:
Breeding

THE CORNER of Mo Tianliao's lips twitched. Using his own shell as a spiritual companion was…an extremely good idea.

A faint whimper came from under the tiger rug, startling Menghu awake from his deep slumber. He lifted his paws, and a snow-white fox wriggled out from under the tiger's belly.

"Shuangren?" Mo Tianliao picked the little fox up. "I thought you were back at the sect."

The little fox had just recovered from his injuries, and Yanlie hadn't let him participate in the sect's internal competition. By all rights, he shouldn't have had the chance to come along. They all vividly remembered the fox being perched on Yanlie's shoulder when they boarded the flying ship.

"Sneaking out isn't a good habit to have." Xuanji poked the little fox's ear with the hemp rope.

The fox buried his head in his bushy tail and curled himself into a ball. He'd heard that his younger sister had originally been sold at Six Harmonies Bazaar, so she was probably in one of the orthodox sects. Other than the three great sects, many other minor sects were also attending this grand summit. His chances of finding his sister would be much higher than searching sect by sect.

So, when no one was paying attention, he'd clung on to the fur on the underside of the tiger's belly and hitched a ride onto the flying ship.

Zimo transformed into human form and took the little fox into his arms. "Ah, well, this is just perfect. I don't have a spiritual companion yet." He'd meant to carry Bailuo around as a rabbit and pass him off as his spiritual companion, but Bailuo loved to fight so much that he wanted to participate in the competition himself, so he'd turned Zimo down.

The little fox flailed his limbs, refusing to let Zimo carry him around. Martens were fierce creatures who would bite him if he wasn't careful.

"He doesn't want you to carry him." Still chewing on a short piece of straw, Bailuo transformed into his human form and snatched the fox away.

A rabbit! The little fox's eyes lit up, and he chomped down on Bailuo's neck, rendering him speechless.

Mo Tianliao pressed his lips together, struggling not to laugh as he lowered his head and picked out the fish bones. Qingtong reached for the little fox and tucked it under his neck as a pillow. And with that, peace and quiet returned.

***

THE THREE GREAT SECTS were situated quite far away from one another, primarily because each powerhouse needed vast territories in order to develop. This included minor affiliated sects, cultivators' cities under their jurisdiction, and so on—even mortal states that paid tribute.

A large flying ship like this could transport a lot of people, but it was slow; it would take almost a month to reach Liuyun Sect. As those aboard were disciples at the core formation stage and above, they could go without food—so there was no need to stop for supplies along the way, and the ship flew directly to its destination.

Traveling without making any stops on the way had the benefit of being much safer, preventing anyone with ill intent from discovering their location. The downside, however, was boredom.

Mo Tianliao's senior and his master were both big cats who loved sleeping, so even when they spent the whole day dozing and basking in the sun on the observation deck, they never got bored. The little fox, being a stowaway, kept a low profile and dutifully served as Qingtong's pillow. As for Mo Tianliao, other than serving His Feline Lordship, he spent his time diligently cultivating. Bailuo was content as long as he had hemp rope to gnaw on, although he occasionally sprang up to fight with someone. Mo

Tianliao was impressed by this chubby rabbit. In just a few short days, he managed to chew up a whole tray of hemp rope. Xuanji didn't mind, though. He braided them to give away anyway—even if there were often no takers.

"Why does Second Shibo like braiding hemp rope so much?" Mo Tianliao sidled up to the tiger cushion to whisper a question to his master.

The hot breath tickled Qingtong's ear, and he flicked it away, pressing it into the tiger's fur. "Because—"

"The drumsticks are ready! Come dig in!" Zimo had brought out a large plate of roasted chicken drumsticks.

The little fox under Qingtong's neck promptly cried out in delight and wiggled out. He turned into a young boy and looked expectantly at Zimo. The tiger, too, stared at the drumsticks with widened eyes.

Mo Tianliao took a piece, placed it on a jade plate, and cut it into small pieces that he fed one at a time to Qingtong. The drumstick was juicy and succulent, but His Feline Lordship didn't like getting the fur around his mouth dirty.

Xuanji was envious as he watched how attentive Qingtong's disciples were to their master. He looked around for his disciples and spotted Huaqing on the second level, so he stood up and moved to the railing.

Huaqing beckoned to his master. "Shizun, I just concocted new inedia pills. They come in several flavors. Would you like to try one?"

The other disciples on the second floor bowed in greeting at the arrival of Xuanji-zhenren, who was standing with his hands at his back. Xuanji cast Huaqing an inscrutable look and walked away without so much as a word.

Xuanji looked at the tiger who was gnawing on a drumstick while still fulfilling his duty as a cushion, the wooden post who alternated between feeding and offering his master tea, and the little fox who'd come over of his own accord to serve as a backrest when he'd finished his drumstick, and sighed. He could only dream of having disciples like that.

They spent the rest of their journey exactly like this, so boring and uneventful that Xuanji started to grow mold.

At last, they arrived at Liuyun Sect.

True to its name, Liuyun Sect was nestled among mountains enveloped in swirling mists and floating clouds. Perhaps because the west was windier, the clouds around the mountains never stopped drifting and changing. Their main gate, about a hundred feet tall, was carved from white jade to look like flowing clouds leading straight to the mountain path. It was a majestic and awe-inspiring sight. Some of the disciples who were visiting Liuyun Sect for the first time couldn't help but marvel.

"Welcome, Xuanji-zhenren, Qingtong-zhenren." Two Liuyun Sect disciples dressed in white wide-sleeved cultivator robes embroidered with red flowing cloud patterns stepped forward to greet them. When they saw the admiration in the Woyun Sect disciples' eyes, their chests puffed up in pride. Liuyun Sect was very wealthy, having secretly engaged in the business of rearing spirit beasts for trade.

Qingtong glanced at the two Liuyun Sect disciples and snorted, stopping at the gate without proceeding further. Xuanji, who'd just taken a step out, retracted his foot.

Having attended several grand summits before, Huaqing understood immediately. He stepped forward. "The Woyun Sect delegation is here," he said coolly. "Please announce our arrival."

The two Liuyun Sect disciples traded glances. One smiled. "Of course, we know you're from Woyun Sect. There's no need to announce your arrival. You may simply enter."

Qingtong scoffed—a clear, melodious sound, but to the cultivators, it was as violent as a thunderclap. The two late core formation Liuyun Sect disciples involuntarily stepped back.

"Two of our sect's sanctum-masters are here, yet you people sent two mere core formation disciples to welcome us." Zimo pulled out a drumstick and stuffed it into the mouth of the Liuyun Sect disciple who was about to retort. "Tsk, tsk. Looks like these guys are so poor they don't even have a soul transformation elder. Here, have a drumstick on me."

When other sects visited, it was proper etiquette to send someone of corresponding rank to welcome them, as a sign of respect. By flippantly sending two core formation cultivators, they were clearly snubbing Woyun

Sect. Other minor sects that were arriving after them saw the commotion and stopped to watch the show.

“My apologies! We’ve been so busy we forgot our manners!” a deep voice boomed from the mountain path. Shortly after, a man in a robe embroidered with blue cloud patterns arrived riding the wind. He had white hair and a ruddy complexion framed by a long beard that reached his waist. A leopard with flame patterns on its body followed by his side. This was Elder Qiu, the Liuyun Sect elder in charge of sect affairs, which put him second only to the sect leader. He held a prominent position in the sect, so it was only fitting for him to welcome the Woyun Sect delegation. Qingtong eyed him coldly and said nothing.

“What are you waiting for?!” Elder Qiu snapped at the two disciples, stroking his beard. “Apologize to your elders from Woyun Sect! Ill-mannered wretches!”

Qingtong didn’t wait for the two disciples to speak. He proceeded up the white jade steps with a flick of his sleeves, leaving Elder Qiu to trot after him.

Elder Qiu turned to strike up a conversation with Xuanji-zhenren, but Xuanji-zhenren met his gaze with hostile eyes. It really gave Elder Qiu a fright. He’d heard that Xuanji-zhenren of Woyun Sect was a volatile one—by the looks of it, he seemed to be even harder to get along with than Qingtong-zhenren. Elder Qiu was racking his brains for a conversation topic when he caught sight of the tiger following beside Qingtong. His eyes lit up. “Look at how much your tiger cub has grown. As it happens, my leopard has also reached maturity. What do you say to having them mate during this meet?”

The offspring of spirit beasts that had signed a blood pact could only form new pacts with the blood kin of the original owner. They couldn’t be sold, but they made perfect gifts for one’s descendants.

Mo Tianliao choked on his water. Was Elder Qiu seriously suggesting breeding his senior? He glanced down at Menghu, and sure enough, the tiger, who had been looking around, had tripped and stumbled up the stone steps. The flame leopard looked at the tiger with disdain. She clearly thought he was an idiot.

Luckily for Menghu, Qingtong rejected the offer without a second thought. “Not necessary.” The tiger heaved a sigh of relief and nuzzled against his master’s legs.

Elder Qiu almost rolled his eyes. He’d gone out of his way to show goodwill, yet they continued to disrespect him. “A leopard has at least two cubs per litter. You only need to breed them once, and you can get one—”

Qingtong raised his hand to interrupt the chattering pimp. “To ensure he stays focused on cultivation,” he said, his voice cold, “I’ve castrated him.”

The tiger went rigid, his raised paw frozen in midair like a statue as the mountain wind of Liuyun Sect ruffled his fur.

MINI EXTRA

Spirit Beast A: Have you heard? That tiger has no dick!

Spirit Beast B: Oh, so he’s a eunuch tiger.

Eldest Shixiong: *speechless*

Taishi: Divine Artifact Brand Tiger Penis! Only 998 a day to rent for your own use!

Chapter 60:
Tiger Penis

THE GROUP FIRST WENT to meet Liumang-zhenren, the sect leader of Liuyun Sect.

Mo Tianliao had to stay quiet for a moment upon hearing that cultivator's name so that he could read it out with a straight face.

Liuyun Sect had a tradition. Whenever there was a change of sect leader, everyone in the same generation as the new sect leader would have to change their name to include the character "Liu." This sect leader had originally been called Weimang-zhenren, and his fellow disciples used to have names like Weichen, Weichan, and so on. When he became the sect leader, his fellow disciples changed their names too. Most of them sounded fine; it was only the sect leader's new name that…wasn't ideal for a man of his station. It sounded almost identical to the word for "gangster."

When his fellow disciples became elders of the sect, they could forgo using their cultivator name, like the artificer Elder Ding. But not the sect leader. The sect leader represented the whole sect, and he had to be addressed by his cultivator name as a show of respect, even though they might as well have been calling him "Hooligan-zhenren" or "Thug-zhenren."

Looking up at the Liuyun Sect leader's shifty triangular eyes, Mo Tianliao felt that Liumang-zhenren's master must have given him that name with a deeper reason in mind.

"Qingtong, it's been a long time. You still look so…young…" Liumang-zhenren stood up from his seat when he saw Qingtong, completely ignoring Xuanji.

Mo Tianliao frowned. Just as the sect leader was about to touch his cat, he decisively held up a jade box between them. "This is a gift from our sect leader." He shoved it into Liumang-zhenren's hands.

"That's too kind of Tianlang." The sect leader of Liuyun Sect didn't even look at it, just handed the jade box to the disciple behind him. "You

must all be tired after the long journey, so I won't keep you here."

Qingtong unclenched his fist. Too bad. If his dumb disciple hadn't intercepted him, he would have punched Liumang in the nose.

The whole of Liuyun Sect was extravagantly built, with all the important steps paved with white jade. Ordinary white jade wasn't actually particularly valuable in the cultivation world, but it'd still cost a lot to use it on such a scale. The mountain range here was quite peculiar, with many curiously funnel-shaped mountains: narrow at the bottom and wide at the top. Shrouded in swirling mist and clouds all year round, they looked like immortals' islands floating among the sea of clouds.

Elder Qiu took the group from Woyun Sect to one of these "islands," where there was a complete palace with thirty side rooms and five private courtyards, as well as a team of maidservants and attendants to attend to the distinguished guests. Mo Tianliao surveyed their surroundings. While it was quiet and secluded, it also isolated them from the other areas of Liuyun Sect, no doubt to prevent them from snooping around the sect's secrets.

The five courtyards each had their own distinctive characteristics. Xuanji let Qingtong have the first pick, and Qingtong unhesitatingly chose one where the wisteria were in bloom. Xuanji chose the one with a pond.

"The remaining three are yours to choose from," Xuanji said to his personal disciples.

The common disciples took the side rooms, with the talkative Zimo responsible for supervising them. Yuli and Huaqing took the courtyard farthest from Qingtong, while Zimo and Bailuo decided to share one of the other two. They then turned to Mo Tianliao.

"There's no one attending to my master. I'll stay with him." Mo Tianliao smiled, looking the epitome of filial piety.

Taken aback, Xuanji turned to look at his two disciples. Huaqing had already turned into a butterfly and flown off to frolic among the flowers. Yuli stared back at him with lifeless fish eyes and said, "Shizun, lend me your pond for a soak."

Seeing Mo Tianliao trailing eagerly after Qingtong and the tiger tagging along to serve as a footrest, Xuanji clutched his chest and wordlessly entered his courtyard. Yuli did follow him in, but he made a

beeline for the small, clear pond and jumped in with a splash, happily blowing a bubble.

“Shizun, come in and swim with me!” The silver carp swished his tail happily.

Xuanji squatted by the pond and looked at the fish, consoling himself that at least his disciple still cared enough to ask him in for a swim…

It was late autumn by now, and the wisteria should have withered a long time ago, but here in this courtyard, they were in full bloom. There was a wooden trellis about ten feet square, with clusters of wisteria flowers hanging down from a single vine that had climbed all over it.

Qingtong stood beneath the trellis and gingerly touched a cluster of wisteria flowers. The little bell-like flowers trembled slightly at his touch.

Mo Tianliao leaned against a wooden pillar and watched the beautiful man under the trellis, unable to bring himself to disturb him. The snowy hem of his robe fluttered in the breeze as he touched the light purple flowers again with a slender, fair hand—then his claws sprang out, and he gave the flowers a few quick swipes.

Mo Tianliao gaped at him.

He turned around to set up a spell array around the courtyard and added a few more protective barriers. When he was done, he found his master had already laid out a cushion beneath the flower frame and was leaning against the tiger, dozing. Mo Tianliao walked over and covered him with a blanket before heading inside to inspect the place.

The furnishings in the room were exquisite, with a bed, a table, and an incense burner table all made of white jade. Mo Tianliao carefully checked every nook and cranny to make sure the place was suitable, simultaneously searching for any concealed magical artifacts or spying mirrors. Reassured, he went to draw some water from the well and heated it up with his fire-element spiritual energy to brew a pot of tea. Then he went to the kitchen to prepare some snacks.

Taishi, who hadn’t spoken the entire journey, couldn’t hold himself back any longer. Mo Tianliao took off the bracer on his arm and let him turn into a big mouth.

“Master, when are we going to steal the Jadefruit?”

Previously, when Mo Tianliao had asked Taishi if there were other ways to mend a divine soul besides dual cultivation, Taishi had mentioned an artifact that could connect divine souls. This required several rare items: Jadefruit, Emperor’s Repose Herb, the wood of the Resurrection Tree, and Ninesouls Crystal. In addition, the injured person needed to consume the Three Mulberry Soul-Condensing Fruit beforehand, while the one assisting needed to learn the art of soul transfer.

Mo Tianliao rubbed his forehead. Trust Taishi to speak so confidently when it knew they were about to steal something. “If you have nothing important to say, just go talk to the well.”

His master had already consumed the Three Mulberry Soul-Condensing Fruit, and he already had the Ninesouls Crystal. Apart from keeping his master company, the main reason Mo Tianliao had come to Liuyun Sect was to get his hands on the Jadefruit.

The Jadefruit, which grew on the Jadetree, was an essential ingredient for concocting a nascent soul elixir. The most important part of breaking through to the nascent soul stage was condensing one’s divine soul into a nascent form. The Jadefruit acted like a gel that could aid in the consolidation and shaping of the divine soul. If refined into a nascent soul elixir, it could increase the odds of forming a nascent soul by 20 percent.

And Liuyun Sect was the only place in Taixuan with a Jadetree. This was also the reason the price of nascent soul elixirs remained high.

Rejected by his master once again, Taishi flew outside the house. Seeing the tiger still awake and playing with fallen flowers, he flew over excitedly. “Hey, Stripes, I heard you got castrated.”

The tiger looked up and bared his fangs at the big mouth. He’d seen this thing before. How had his junior even forged this thing? His master had forbade him from telling anyone else about it, and of course he understood why—an object that could speak and change shape was certainly no ordinary item. But why was it so rude?

The big mouth turned into a jade phallus. Trying very hard to emphasize that he was a tiger phallus, he added a layer of fine fur at the base, although the “fur” was as hard as steel needles. He wiggled around in

front of the tiger. “That leopard lady today was quite pretty. Need my help?”

A thunderous tiger roar reverberated through the clouds. Without even opening his eyes, Qingtong gave his tiger cushion a smack.

Mo Tianliao walked out with the tea and snacks and was greeted by the truly unpleasant sight of the tiger gnawing with gusto on a tortoiseshell dildo.

Plop—

At the sight of his junior’s appalled expression, the tiger realized what he was doing and opened his mouth, dropping Taishi—who’d had it coming. His saliva-coated body went tumbling across the ground, gaining a coating of dirt and soil.

Mo Tianliao dragged a low table out from the house. Settling down on a cushion, he poured two cups of hot tea and set one aside to cool while he drank the other cup. When he was finished, he picked up the tea, which was no longer scalding, and stroked the crown of the man beside him. “Shizun, have some tea.”

The man sleeping peacefully against the tiger mumbled a vague response and curled up, moving his head to Mo Tianliao’s lap to continue sleeping.

Mo Tianliao’s hand, which was holding out the teacup, stiffened for a moment. Slowly, he set the cup down and pulled the thin blanket over his shizun. He stroked his long, ink-black hair. “Pawpaw, you…” *Do you know being this intimate with me in your human form is already crossing the line?* Do you know what you’re doing?

Looking at that exquisite profile, he slid his hand down slowly and stroked that velvety-smooth chin. Qingtong slowly tilted his chin up for him, revealing an expanse of fair neck.

So well-behaved… A smile spread across Mo Tianliao’s lips. He wanted to bend down and kiss him, but he was sitting with his legs outstretched, so it was a bit hard for him to bend down to his lap.

Just as Mo Tianliao was savoring the experience of having a gorgeous man slumbering in his lap, someone triggered the ward outside the

door. The main door was open, and Mo Tianliao could see the visitor, but as he had also set a maze array, the person outside couldn't see what was happening in the courtyard. All he could see was a tightly shut door that couldn't be opened no matter how he pushed.

Mo Tianliao had seen this person before—it was the man named Ding Zijin, who'd tried to demand a trade for the Meteorfall Stone as soon as they left Six Harmonies Bazaar. He stood respectfully before the door with a jade slip in his hands.

"Junior Ding Zijin, here to deliver the itinerary for the grand summit."

Mo Tianliao lifted his chin at Taishi. Anyone could do something as menial as delivering an itinerary. The fact that Ding Zijin still dared to show up here even after getting smacked by Qingtong the last time they met was proof enough that he had something to say. His affairs were none of Mo Tianliao's business, though. His cat needed to sleep, and he couldn't let these trivial matters disrupt him.

The dirt-covered Taishi flew to the door and said in a gentle, high-pitched voice that was similar to the attendants at Qingning Palace, "The zhenren is resting. I can't open the door. Please leave the item by the door. If you wish to pay a visit, come again tomorrow."

"In that case, I shall come again tomorrow." Ding Zijin set the jade slip on the jade step before the door and bowed to the closed door before taking his leave.

"At least he knows his manners," yawned Qingtong from where he was lying on Mo Tianliao's lap.

"Did we wake you up?" Mo Tianliao lifted him into his arms and tipped the teacup against his lips.

Qingtong lay lazily against Mo Tianliao's chest and, without even lifting a finger, drank the entire cup of tea from Mo Tianliao's hand. "What were you two saying about the Jadefruit earlier?"

"It's for restoring the divine soul." Taishi the Mudball switched back to his usual chatty voice and flew over solicitously to rattle off the items needed for mending the divine soul. "Actually," he added, "it doesn't have

to be so complicated. There’s an easier way, but Master refuses to use—yow!”

A ball of woodfire promptly baked the layer of mud coating the jade into a ceramic shell.

Chapter 61:
Bath

MO TIANLIAO SUMMONED Taishi back to his hand, banged him hard against the ground to knock off the ceramic, and forcibly turned him back into a bracer.

“Hm?” Qingtong looked up at Mo Tianliao. “What simple method?”

“Uh…” Mo Tianliao looked down at those eyes brimming with curiosity. Qingtong’s beautifully shaped mouth was slightly parted due to the angle of his tilted head, offering a glimpse of a pink tongue. Unable to resist, he slowly leaned in, but then he felt an itch in his left ear and turned.

A furry tiger head was leaning in as well, staring at him with eyes as big as copper bells, every bit as curious.

He’d almost forgotten his senior was here too.

The sight of the tiger made Qingtong remember—he extracted the little fox from his inventory bracelet. He’d almost forgotten that he’d shoved the fox in there when they disembarked for fear that the other disciples would see him.

The fox, who had been curled into a ball, shook out his fur and took two wobbly steps before flopping down onto the soft cushion. His legs had gone numb from so much time cramped in the bracelet for so long. After kicking his legs a bit to restore sensation in them, he transformed into a young man. Mo Tianliao sent him to fetch the jade slip at the door.

Ding Zijin had indeed placed the event itinerary outside.

Three Sects’ Grand Summit would begin in three days, and until then, they could enjoy the scenery and socialize in Liuyun Sect. The grand summit would kick off with a battle of skills such as artifact forging, elixir concocting, creating spell arrays, and so on. This would last for ten days and conclude with a combat match using spellcraft. Those who had participated in the skills competition could continue on to the combat matches. Every event had prizes, although specifically what these were

wasn’t mentioned in the itinerary. They’d probably be announced during the meet itself.

Dusk approached, and the mountain wind turned chilly.

Beside the master bedroom, the courtyard also had rooms for attendants to rest and a shed for spiritual companions. Qingtong stood up and yawned. After ordering Mo Tianliao to heat bathwater for him, and ordering Shuangren to tether the spiritual companion, he entered the master bedroom.

Tether the spiritual companion? The little fox blinked and looked at Menghu, sitting beside him. *This one?*

Mo Tianliao coughed softly into his fist and set about gathering up the cushions and blanket from the ground. Once he was done, he hurried off to heat the bathwater.

Since this courtyard was for distinguished guests, its amenities were excellent.

The bathroom featured a bathtub carved from white jade, and it was spacious enough to accommodate two people. Mo Tianliao quickly fetched the water and stirred it with his hand. His fire-element spiritual energy promptly heated the water until it steamed. After a moment’s thought, he went to the yard and plucked some wisteria flowers; he washed them clean, then tossed them in.

Through the screen, he watched Qingtong undress and swallowed hard. Once Qingtong stepped into the bathtub, he walked over, keeping a straight face. “Let me wash your hair for you.”

Qingtong frowned. *This insolent disciple.* How rude to barge in like this when I’m furless! He glanced at the bathtub, but seeing as the water surface was covered with petals, obscuring the view below his neck, he held back his temper.

Mo Tianliao knew what his cat was thinking when he saw his expression. Pressing his lips together to suppress a smile, he dragged over a high stool and sat beside the bathtub. “Make it white. Black hair’s too hard to wash clean.”

“You talk too much.” Qingtong tried to smack him, but Mo Tianliao caught his arm and wiped it slowly with a soft cloth. The arm resting on the edge of the white jade tub was so fair it was hard to tell which was whiter.

“I haven’t had the chance to bathe you ever since you evolved into human form.” Mo Tianliao traced along the contour of Qingtong’s forearm to his upper arm.

Qingtong pulled his arm away and put it back into the water. He said nothing, although his ink-black hair gradually turned white. This transformation technique was controlled by the divine soul, and letting it turn it back to its original color could ease the strain it placed on his divine soul.

Taking up the wooden scoop, Mo Tianliao gently poured water over Qingtong’s snow-white crown to wet his hair before applying perfumed soap and massaging it in. In the past, Mo Tianliao used to bathe his cat just like this. If he made sure to carefully shield the cat’s ears and eyes from the water, His Feline Lordship wouldn’t get angry. And gently scratching and massaging him with his fingertips always made His Feline Lordship very comfortable.

White fur got dirty easily, and his cat was extremely fastidious. When Mo Tianliao wasn’t forging artifacts, he bathed him practically every day. His Feline Lordship was usually fierce, but when it came to baths, he was very well-behaved—probably because of how skilled Mo Tianliao was with his hands.

As long, slender, and strong fingers weaved through his soft hair, gently scratching his scalp, Qingtong narrowed his eyes in comfort and leaned back in the bathtub, resting his head on the edge. The rim of the bathtub was thick, and there was even a curved groove at one end for him to rest his head.

“Pawpaw,” Mo Tianliao called out softly, looking down at him.

“Mm?” Qingtong muttered in vague response, not even protesting his insolent disciple’s use of that nickname.

“Who bathed you for the last three hundred years?” Mo Tianliao rinsed his hair with a scoop of water, one hand shielding his ears. Qingning Palace had so many attendants. Had these women bathed Qingtong all these

years? The thought of them touching his cat's tender skin made him want to throw them all into a furnace.

"Myself, of course. Who else would I ask?" Qingtong tugged at Mo Tianliao's chin.

Mo Tianliao kissed his damp fingers and wiped down his hair with a towel. "Your body… Let me wash it for you, too?"

"Hm…" Qingtong considered this for a moment, and then smacked him on the head.

In the end, Mo Tianliao never got the privilege of bathing a furless Pawpaw. Instead, he was driven out of the bathroom to wait pitifully outside.

The bracer on his wrist flashed, and Taishi's voice spoke up in his consciousness. "Tsk, tsk, how did I end up with such a hopeless master?"

"Shut up." Mo Tianliao turned to tidy up the bed. His cat was fond of sleeping in soft places, and while this white jade bed had bedding, it was still a little hard. Liuyun Sect was really stingy. Couldn't they add a mattress?

To be fair, though, most high-level cultivators rarely needed to sleep; all they needed was a meditation cushion for cultivating and resting. Who would have expected a soul transformation cultivator of Woyun Sect to require a soft bed?

"He was originally your cat, raised as a demonic companion. You can totally make your move on him and help him repair his divine soul while you're at it." Taishi flew off his arm and transformed into a big mouth. "Or —Master…are you not able to get it up?"

Qingtong stepped out of the bathroom and found Mo Tianliao burning something. Not thinking much of it, he walked over, drying his hair. There was a plush rug on the floor, and Qingtong stepped onto it barefoot, wearing a loose, snow-white inner garment. Water droplets dampened parts of the fabric; it clung to his body, faintly revealing the gleaming skin beneath.

Mo Tianliao threw Taishi aside and walked over to carry Qingtong to the bed. "The floor's cold. Why aren't you wearing shoes?" He sat on the

edge of the bed and set those fair feet on his lap. With a cloth, he carefully wiped them down. Then he took the towel from Qingtong's hand and dried his hair for him.

When he was halfway done, Mo Tianliao put down the towel and combed his fingers through the white strands, smoothing it down. Fire spiritual energy flowed warm through his hands, gradually drying the long hair.

Qingtong yawned and cast a disdainful glance at Mo Tianliao's thighs. He patted them with a hand, covered them with a towel, then lay down and let him continue stroking his hair.

Mo Tianliao, taken by surprise, broke out in a smile. Since the misunderstanding about the pendant, their interactions had gradually returned to the way they were when Qingtong was little. His master would act spoiled, get lazy, and even lie on his lap and demand pats.

Mo Tianliao summoned Taishi over and turned him into a comb to brush through that silky smooth hair. Qingtong narrowed his eyes and purred contentedly. In no time at all, he fell asleep.

Mo Tianliao tucked him under the blankets and went to bathe. He'd only just put his clothes back on when a frown creased his face—someone had triggered the protective barrier.

He hurried to the yard and found Shuangren crouching on the top of the wall. Seeing Mo Tianliao approach, he quickly jumped down and stood sheepishly, bowing his head. "Second Shixiong…"

"Sneaking out?" Mo Tianliao dried his hair with his hand. The protective barrier in this courtyard was two-way; no one could enter, but no one could get out either.

"I'm thinking of walking around to find my sister." Shuangren pursed his lips. He had a feeling that his sister was right here in the sect.

"No." Mo Tianliao turned him down without hesitation. "There are wards and spell arrays everywhere here. It's too dangerous at night."

"As long as my sister is within one and a half miles of me, I can smell her scent." Shuangren stared stubbornly at the protective barrier on the wall.

Mo Tianliao's brows furrowed gently before relaxing. "No problem. I'll have a way tomorrow."

"Really?" Shuangren stared at him with his fox eyes.

"You've been waiting for so long; it'll be fine if you wait one more night. Don't cause trouble for Shizun." Mo Tianliao ruffled Shuangren's hair. Seeing him nod obediently, he returned to the room…only to find that the man on the bed had his eyes open. Then again, that was to be expected. Soul transformation cultivators had keen hearing, and the slight commotion in the yard certainly couldn't escape his ears.

Mo Tianliao climbed into bed and scooped him into his arms. "Sleep."

Not really fond of being hugged out of nowhere, Qingtong squirmed out of his arms and pushed him toward the outer part of the bed, turning to face the other way. He didn't drive him away, though; he'd grown accustomed to sharing the bed during the month on the flying ship.

Mo Tianliao didn't disturb him, but he twirled a lock of snowy white hair around his finger and played with it. Once the man beside him drifted off to sleep, he reached out and took him into his embrace.

It wasn't that he didn't want to touch Qingtong. Mo Tianliao was more than willing to try the dual cultivation method that Taishi had spoken of. But…Qingtong wouldn't even sign a blood pact with him because he didn't want to be a servant. Such a proud guy would never agree to be subjected to such treatment!

It wasn't unusual for demonic cultivators to take their companions into bed once they'd evolved into human form, but how many of those demonic companions were truly willing? They just couldn't resist because they were bound by the blood pact. If he slept with Qingtong under the pretext of healing him, how would he be any different from those people who coerced their demonic companions with their blood pacts?

The demon lord, who'd never gotten hung up on morals before, suddenly became an expert on ethics when it came to his own cat. Mo Tianliao gazed down at the man in his arms, his fair face buried in the crook of Mo Tianliao's arm as he slept peacefully. The light purple pendant rested over his chest, flickering on and off.

Mo Tianliao frowned. The Ninesouls Crystal pendant was reacting. Either Qingtong's divine soul was unstable, or someone nearby was using the Spirit-Disciplining Horn.

"Ugh…" Sure enough, Qingtong opened his eyes a crack and mumbled, "Headache."

Mo Tianliao leaned over and kissed his pale, thin lips. The Ninesouls Crystal greatly reduced the effects of the horn, but Qingtong's divine soul was so fragile that any slight disturbance caused him pain. The sweetness spreading on Mo Tianliao's lips made it hard for him to stop, left him wanting more. He tightened his embrace around Qingtong's slender, supple body, while his other hand under the blanket reached into that soft inner garment.

Just a touch, he swore, a fleeting touch!

MINI EXTRA

Woodworker: I'll just touch him a bit.

Fifteen minutes later.

Woodworker: Just a bit more.

Two hours later.

Woodworker: I'll stop after this.

A night later.

Woodworker: …

Chapter 62:
Fox

THEIR SOULS CONNECTED, a sensation so comfortable and intoxicating that Qingtong lost himself in it and didn't notice what Mo Tianliao was up to.

The skin under his hand was so silky and supple that it felt like warm jade. Mo Tianliao caressed it fondly. He'd told himself he'd only touch for a little while, but his hand felt like it was stuck; he was so loath to stop that he couldn't pull it away.

Then he touched some sensitive spot, though, and Qingtong let out an involuntary moan. The sound sent a jolt through Mo Tianliao, causing him to gasp sharply as his body reacted. He couldn't help himself—he hugged Qingtong even closer and rubbed against him. When his scorching hand slid down to Qingtong's soft rear, however, Qingtong finally realized what was happening, and he clawed hard at that wayward hand.

"Ouch—" Mo Tianliao grimaced and jerked his hand away.

"Insolent disciple, you—" Qingtong's rebuke died in his throat as he felt something hard poking against him. Mo Tianliao coughed awkwardly and shrank back.

Silence fell, and the atmosphere turned awkward.

Qingtong glared at Mo Tianliao, then kicked his calf and rolled over so that his back was to him. He didn't say a word. He couldn't believe that dumbass had actually…

Mo Tianliao took a deep breath and regulated his inner energy to calm his arousal. Once the heat in his body had subsided a little, he moved over and nuzzled Qingtong's ear with his chin. "Does it still hurt?"

"Mo Tianliao, you're not allowed to touch me when I'm furless. Do you understand?" With half of his face buried in the pillow, his voice sounded muffled.

Mo Tianliao pressed his lips together and said nothing.

When he didn’t get an answer, Qingtong turned over and glared at him. “What? Cat got your tongue?”

“I know my Pawpaw is no longer a kitten.” Mo Tianliao leaned in and pressed his forehead against Qingtong’s. Seeing Qingtong was about to lose his temper again, he hurriedly continued, “I know I’m taking liberties with you by doing this.”

Qingtong’s frosty eyes widened. *And you still do it?*

“But what can I do? I can’t help myself. Why don’t you take liberties with me in return?” Mo Tianliao grasped one slender hand and pressed it against himself. He was only wearing an inner garment, and his waist sash had come undone earlier, exposing a portion of his well-toned chest.

Qingtong looked on blankly as Mo Tianliao pulled his hand to rest where he most yearned for his touch—the warm, comforting place at his core that pulsed steadily with his heartbeat. Three centuries ago at Annihilation Valley, he’d nuzzled his head against that spot repeatedly, but no matter what he’d done, he could never warm it up again.

Mo Tianliao slowly released his grip and let those long, slender fingers trace across his chest.

“Can your chest turn into wood?” Qingtong scratched it with his fingertips out of curiosity.

“Huh?” Mo Tianliao was feeling rather restless and distracted from being scratched, but when he heard “wood,” he obediently withdrew the divine soul in that area, promptly turning his sturdy muscles into wood with green bark. Qingtong’s eyes lit up. Turning his hands into claws, he went nuts scratching away.

And so a speechless Mo Tianliao, who had been hoping to let the atmosphere build up a little more before laying his heart bare, ended up lying there all night for his beloved to sharpen his claws on him, killing any budding romantic atmosphere utterly dead. He had no choice but to silently swallow his bitter tears and wait for his cat to wear himself out and fall asleep before turning his chest back to normal.

Sighing in resignation, he took the sleeping Qingtong into his embrace and kissed the top of his head. “I’m not trying to take liberties with you. I just couldn’t help myself.”

Mo Tianliao couldn’t see it at this angle, but the ears of the man nestled against his chest turned red.

***

THE NEXT DAY, as expected, Ding Zijin came.

Qingtong was still asleep, so Mo Tianliao erected a soundproof barrier around the bed so that his sleep wouldn’t be disrupted. Then he invited Ding Zijin in for a seat and poured him a cup of tea.

“My master is still meditating. Please don’t hold it against us.”

“It is I who have been presumptuous.” Ding Zijin hurriedly apologized for dropping by unannounced and took the opportunity to observe this disciple Qingtong-zhenren apparently favored. “Is this your first time at Liuyun Sect?”

Of the two, one was eager to make connections, while the other wanted to exploit the other, so a little back-and-forth was all it took for them to become chummy. The crafty Mo Tianliao was an old hand at getting information out of someone. As it turned out, Ding Zijin was here for the Meteorfall Stone again. The Dings were artificers by trade, so they were certain to be participating in the artifact-forging competition at this grand summit. To score a decisive victory against his younger brother, the son of a concubine, he was desperate to get the Meteorfall Stone.

“I see.” Mo Tianliao smiled. “My master *did* give me a small piece of the Meteorfall Stone.”

Ding Zijin’s eyes lit up. Getting the Meteorfall Stone from this core formation cultivator would be much easier than begging Qingtong-zhenren for it.

“Except…” Mo Tianliao scratched his head, looking to be put on the spot. “I’m an artificer too, so I also have to take part in the artifact-forging match. I heard the Jadefruit is among the prizes.”

Ding Zijin’s heart sank when Mo Tianliao said he was also an artificer, but he perked up again at the mention of Jadefruit. “You must have

been misinformed. The Jadefruit isn't among the list of prizes."

Mo Tianliao frowned, looking very disappointed.

"But, if you want one, I might be able to help," Ding Zijin offered politely, though his expression was confident.

"Really?" Mo Tianliao feigned delight. "Truth be told, I wanted the Jadefruit for advancement to the nascent soul stage in the future. If I can trade the Meteorfall Stone for it, I could just skip the match."

They sealed the deal, and Mo Tianliao expressed his wish to see the Jadetree. Ding Zijin assumed he just wanted to be sure, so he smiled and invited him for a look. The Jadetree was one of the sect's treasures, but distinguished guests could view it from a distance.

Mo Tianliao went to the beast shed and picked up the little fox, claiming that this was a spiritual companion his master had just granted him and that he wanted to take it out to see the world. The tiger, hearing that they were going out to play, stood up too.

"Be good, Chubby. Stay here and keep Shizun company." Mo Tianliao patted his senior on his head.

The tiger bared his fangs. This shidi was really getting more and more out of line!

Liuyun Sect was just as Mo Tianliao expected, with prohibition barriers and spell arrays everywhere, but since Ding Zijin was carrying a special jade token, they could access most places without issue.

The little fox perched on Mo Tianliao's shoulder, sniffing the air intently for any sign of his sister's scent. They went down the mountain, winding around a long jade stairway to the back mountain, when the fox suddenly broke out in a howl.

"What's wrong?" Mo Tianliao hefted the furball down from his shoulder and made eye contact.

My sister! I smell her scent! She's hurt! The little fox struggled to get down. Mo Tianliao pretended to lose his grip, setting the fox free.

"Oh, no!" Mo Tianliao cried, causing Ding Zijin, who was walking ahead, to turn around.

He wasn’t too bothered when he saw that Mo Tianliao’s spirit beast had run off. “Just summon it back through your blood pact.”

“I haven’t signed one yet!” Mo Tianliao got ready to chase after the fox.

“What?!” Alarmed, Ding Zijin looked in the direction where the fox had fled and frowned. A spirit beast that had yet to sign a blood pact would belong to whoever caught it. He still hadn’t gotten his hands on the Meteorfall Stone, so he couldn’t afford to offend Mo Tianliao. Better to use this as an opportunity to do him a favor. “There are many restrictions in the back mountain, so outsiders can’t go there. Don’t worry. I’ll help you look for it.”

With that, the two of them set off in pursuit of the little fox.

***

DEEP IN THE DENSE FOREST stood a row of bamboo houses. In one of them, a snow-white fox trembled in fear, cornered by a red fox. She’d been tortured by the Spirit-Disciplining Horn for so long that she’d become extremely weak; she couldn’t even hold out for very long against this spirit beast that had yet to develop spiritual intelligence.

“Heh heh. This fox is an evolved spirit beast. The aptitude of the cubs she bears will surely be quite high.” Two Liuyun Sect disciples stood guard outside the fence, grinning as they waited for the two spirit beasts to mate.

The red fox bared its fangs, ready to bite the female fox’s neck to subdue her.

“Yaaaaah—!” A piercing cry rang out as another snow-white fox sprang out of nowhere and bit down on the red fox’s neck, ripping out a chunk of flesh.

The trembling fox in the corner looked up in disbelief. It was a moment before she fully understood what had happened. “Gege…”

Chapter 63:
Treasure Tree

THE TWO LIUYUN SECT disciples cried out in alarm. “Where did this spirit beast come from?!” They raised their hands to attack.

The sound of the Spirit-Disciplining Horn could often be heard from this bamboo house, and all the spirit beasts in Liuyun Sect avoided it like the plague. Whether a spirit beast had spiritual intelligence or had signed a pact with a master, few of them in Liuyun Sect came near this mountain. But this one had barged right in, and so ferociously! The two of them were shocked.

“Wait!” Ding Zijin arrived just in time to stop them.

Shuangren stood before his sister, shielding her and watching coldly as the red fox spun around in pain. It bared its fangs and moved to bite him, but it had barely taken two steps when the imposing aura radiating off the little fox had it shrinking back.

A Soul-Soothing Frostfox was a spirit beast of a higher bloodline, and Shuangren had become a spirit cultivator at the soul transformation stage. A first-level spirit beast who had yet to develop a spiritual intelligence could instinctively sense the danger he posed.

A high-level spirit beast’s intimidating presence was crafted using its cultivation. The female fox’s cultivation had been sealed off, and she was physically weak right now, so this ordinary spirit beast had been able to force her into a corner. But Shuangren was different. He’d had time to recuperate in Woyun Sect, and he’d spent time methodically learning spellcraft from Yanlie. And after he’d been nursed back to health with spiritual wine and meat, his cultivation was stable and his spiritual power abundant.

“Scram!” Shuangren attacked the fox with his divine sense, and the creature immediately puffed up in fright. Tucking its tail between its legs, it fled, only to be caught by the two Liuyun Sect disciples outside.

“Oh my.” Mo Tianliao chuckled as he caught up with Shuangren. “And here I was wondering why this kid ran so fast. Looks like he caught a whiff of a vixen.”

Ding Zijin broke out in a grin, too. “This is Mo-shishu from Woyun Sect.”

The two disciples looking after the spirit beasts bowed in greeting to Mo Tianliao. “Our stud is injured,” one said in displeasure. “How are we supposed to tell the Peak Master that the breeding can’t be completed?”

The other disciple pulled his junior aside. This person was clearly a distinguished guest of Ding Zijin. They couldn’t afford to offend him.

“Gege, is that you?” The fox cowered in the corner, not daring to approach. She’d felt like she was dreaming as she watched the snow fox chase off the disgusting red fox and stand guard before her, glaring at those bad guys outside the fence.

Her name was Shuanghua. She’d always lived on the snowy mountains, but one day she’d gotten carried away playing in the woods at the foot of the snowy mountains and lingered a little too long, and a group of hunters on the prowl for spirit beasts came across her. They were merely at the foundation establishment stage, so she wasn’t afraid of them…but then they took out a weird horn that gave her a splitting headache when they blew it, making it hard for her to maintain her human form.

Her brother had rushed over to save her, but there was a core formation cultivator hiding among the hunters, and he was an even match to her brother. They’d used that horn to ambush him and took him away, too. They passed through many hands before eventually being sold to a marketplace. The boss of the auction house said that females were in demand among the orthodox sects, while the males were valuable to the unorthodox sects, so they were separated, and she hadn’t seen her brother since.

She’d heard that demonic cultivators had no qualms doing anything, and human cultivators often did salacious things with their own demonic companions. Her brother, who had been sold to the demonic path, had to be experiencing a fate worse than death. How could he have come to save her? She must be dying, she thought; that was why she was hallucinating.

“Shuanghua.” Seeing Mo Tianliao arrive, Shuangren breathed a sigh of relief and turned around to snuggle with the little furball cowering in the corner. Although he could sense that this particular second senior didn’t really like him, he instinctively trusted him. As far as he was concerned, the bad-tempered second senior was much more reliable than the eldest senior with his silly grin.

Shuanghua only dared to believe this wasn’t a dream when she was in her brother’s familiar embrace. She burst into tears. “Gege! Gege!” She’d only just evolved into human form, so she was still naïve of the ways of the world. When she’d suddenly been imprisoned by these people and forced to mate with strange spirit beasts just so she could bear cubs for them to sell, she’d made up her mind to die. If a spirit beast had actually managed to touch her, she would have self-destructed her spirit core and taken all of them down with her.

“Eh?” The disgruntled Liuyun Sect disciples looked in astonishment at the two huddling foxes. “This vixen is quite the contrary one. She’s already bitten away two breeding mates. So why is this one…”

“Probably because they have a similar coat color,” said Mo Tianliao, leaning idly against the fence and watching the show.

Shuangren hugged his sister and licked her head. The frightened fox burrowed deeper into her brother’s forelegs, her paws tightly clutching the fur on his chest. No matter what, she wouldn’t let go this time. With her brother here, she wasn’t afraid, even if she were to die.

“It’s like what they say about fate bringing people together.” Ding Zijin noticed how happy Mo Tianliao was and whispered into his ears, “Since you haven’t formed a blood pact with this fox yet, why not let it mate with this female fox? You might even gain another spirit beast for free.”

Most people would agree to such a proposal, so Mo Tianliao only thought for a moment before giving the nod.

Ding Zijin sent a telepathic message to the two Liuyun Sect disciples, who looked at each other and beamed with delight. The Peak Master had instructed them to breed this fox no matter what, but all their attempts had failed. There were only so many spirit beasts in Liuyun Sect that had yet to

sign a blood pact. They were at their wits' end at this point—they'd even considered bringing in a dog to breed with her.

Mo Tianliao pretended not to see the three of them trading eye signals at each other and watched the two foxes huddling together. "Brat, can't walk away when you see a pretty girl, huh?"

"Mo-shishu, pardon us for our earlier offense. Since this spirit beast has yet to sign a blood pact, could we borrow it for a few days? You won't be leaving Liuyun Sect during the Grand Summit anyway," the other diplomatic disciple said.

Mo Tianliao frowned. "What? A few days?" He looked quite put off at the idea of leaving his spirit beast in someone else's hands for so long.

"You might not know, but that's the nature of this spirit fox. To breed them successfully, we'd need at least ten to fifteen days." The disciple offered an apologetic smile. The primary concern was that if they didn't succeed the first time, it would be hard to find another male fox that could make this vixen submit. An elder of their sect had set his eyes on this particular fox, so after one litter, they would have to send her to the elder. They couldn't afford further missteps. At the very least, they had to recoup the money they'd spent buying her.

"That won't do." Mo Tianliao stood a step forward, as if he was going to take his fox back. "My master has only just given me this spirit beast. We haven't signed a pact yet. If I leave it here, won't it become your spirit beast instead?"

Negotiation stalled. The Liuyun Sect disciples were afraid he would take the spirit beast away or sign a pact with it right there and then. The offspring of a spirit beast that had yet to sign a blood pact could be sold to anyone, but if this male fox were to sign a pact with Mo Tianliao, then its cubs could only be used by Mo Tianliao's blood kin.

In the end, they compromised. The disciples from Liuyun Sect allowed Mo Tianliao to put a collar artifact on the fox to prove that it was his fox, and they also promised him one cub from the litter produced. Mo Tianliao, for his part, agreed to leave the fox here until the summit concluded.

“Well then, I’m leaving,” Mo Tianliao reluctantly said to the fox in the corner as he put a pretty crystal collar around his neck.

As Mo Tianliao approached, Shuanghua bared her fangs warily at him. When she realized he was actually about to collar her brother, she moved to bite him, but Shuangren stepped on her tail to stop her.

“Gege!” Shuanghua looked at her brother in displeasure.

Shuangren gave her an almost imperceptible shake of his head as he feigned reluctance while the collar was being put on him. Once it was on, he examined it with his divine sense. This collar was actually an inventory collar. Not only did it contain the magical artifact that Mo Tianliao had crafted him to defend against the Spirit-Disciplining Horn, it also contained a spiritual sword, some elixirs and spiritual stones, and a few magical artifacts he’d never seen before.

Blatantly abducting this second fox wouldn’t be as easy as it had been at Shidi’s demon palace. If they screwed up, they would expose Woyun Sect’s secret, so they had to be cautious.

After settling the fox in, Mo Tianliao left with Ding Zijin to see the Jadetree, making a show of reluctantly glancing back every few steps.

***

THE JADETREE GREW on the mountain in Liuyun Sect that was most abundant with spiritual energy. Even before they got close, they could feel its serene, refreshing aura.

“This place is named Jade Mountain,” Ding Zijin told Mo Tianliao enthusiastically. Just then, they encountered another group of visitors. Judging by their attire, they were from Qingyun Sect.

“This is Artificer Ding from our sect,” the Liuyun Sect disciple leading the other group told the Qingyun Sect people.

“Oh! I’ve heard of him. The Pine and Singing Crane Teapot that was given to Elder Yunsong the last time was forged by him,” a female disciple piped up. Her shrill, babbling voice grated on Ding Zijin’s ears.

With a clouded expression, he said coldly, “I’m honored you still remember that little thing my brother made.”

The atmosphere promptly turned awkward, as everyone in Liuyun Sect knew that the two Ding brothers didn’t get along. The girl from Qingyun Sect clearly didn’t know how to read the room and kept on praising that artifact.

The Pine and Singing Crane Teapot had been crafted by Ding Ziyu, his half brother, and it supposedly imitated the techniques of Lord Duantian. It could seal the aroma of the tea completely in the pot without a single leak, and no matter how you messed with the teapot, it wouldn’t spill a drop of water—not unless you triggered a mechanism. It was perfect for use as a personal travel wine flask.

The corner of Mo Tianliao’s lips twitched. No odor leakage, no water spillage—why did it sound like the chamber pots he used to make? You could toss it around on the bed after you used it with no fear of unpleasant smells, and you didn’t have to worry about accidentally kicking the chamber pot over in the middle of the night and spilling it all over your bed. According to the female cultivator, Elder Yunsong carried the teapot with him everywhere. Mo Tianliao made a mental note to point it out to Qingtong during the summit to amuse him.

They ascended the jade steps, where the rocks at the sides gradually went from light brown to jade white. The farther up they went, the more conspicuous it became, and by halfway up the mountain, all the stones were jade stones, with grass and shrubs struggling to survive between the crevices.

“The Jadetree needs white jade to thrive,” Ding Zijin explained in a low voice.

Understanding dawned on the crowd. No wonder white jade was everywhere in Liuyun Sect. Their sect treasure, the Jadetree, needed white jade for sustenance, so new jade had to be added to the mountain every year.

At the top of the mountain was a wide, open space with low grass, and standing silently in the center was a ten-foot-tall tree that didn’t look real. Its trunk and branches were brown, with rough, uneven bark like unpolished jade, while its lush leaves were as thin as cicada wings carved

out of green jade. Jade peaches hung from the upper branches, gleaming brightly in the sunlight.

A breeze swept past, ruffling the grass, but the tree remained perfectly still.

“This has to be a jade sculpture, right?” a disciple from Qingyun Sect exclaimed in wonder, while another rushed over to touch it.

But Mo Tianliao didn’t move. His powerful divine sense allowed him to see that this seemingly peaceful grassland was actually impenetrably protected with interweaving spell arrays that resembled a spider web. Sure enough, the impatient Qingyun Sect disciple was flung thirty feet away by the outermost array.

Mo Tianliao discreetly slipped a jade slip into his palm and imprinted the spell arrays he could see into it. Then he calmly asked, “Ding-xiong, could I possibly view it up close?”

Ding Zijin shook his head. “Only the sect elders can approach this tree. If the arrays are activated an elder will be here right away, so we have to observe from a distance. Let’s not disturb the elders’ peace.”

In fact, these spell arrays were far more treacherous than Ding Zijin implied. The Liuyun Sect disciple with the other group added that if the elders detected an intruder trying to steal the Jadefruit, they would arrive within three breaths and strike the thief dead on sight. It didn’t matter if you truly meant to steal or had just lost your way. He pointed to the stone tablet at the side that said *Death to All Trespassers*.

Mo Tianliao furrowed his brow. *Three breaths, huh…*

Ding Zijin quickly transmitted a private message to him. When the Jadefruit ripened, his father, as a sect elder, would get two. He would come up with a way to get one for Mo Tianliao.

***

BACK AT THE COURTYARD, Qingtong had already woken up and was talking to Xuanji, who had dropped by. Xuanji was discussing with him

what gifts to give to the Liuyun Sect’s juniors.

“Would it be inappropriate to give them all hemp rope?” Xuanji wondered, vexed.

“Yeah.” Qingtong yawned. Seeing Mo Tianliao return, though, his sleepy eyes brightened up a little.

Mo Tianliao naturally didn’t miss that tiny change. An indescribable sense of delight welled up in him. His cat had been waiting for him to come back! If Xuanji hadn’t been there, he’d have pounced on Qingtong and held him tightly in his arms.

The tiger lying at their master’s feet stood up and circled him. He roared: *Where’s little shidi?*

Mo Tianliao didn’t understand tiger language, but Qingtong did, so he asked him casually on Menghu’s behalf, “Where’s Shuangren?”

“Busy with breeding,” Mo Tianliao replied with a grin.

The tiger’s eyes widened in shock. *Come again?*

MINI EXTRA

Eldest Shixiong: How come shidi can breed?

Woodworker: He’s a male fox. Of course he can breed.

Eldest Shixiong: How about me? I’m male too. I’m even more manly than the manliest male. A virile tiger.

Woodworker: You mean a sterile tiger.

Eldest Shixiong: QAQ

Chapter 64:
Mountain Path

THE SHELL IN XUANJI'S HAND fell to the ground with a clatter. He quickly picked it up and wiped it like it was some prized treasure. "Shuangren's still young," he muttered as he wrapped a hemp rope a few times around the shell.

Qingtong glanced at his senior. "Don't bother wrapping it. The grand summit is tomorrow. You'll still need to take it out." Then he beckoned Mo Tianliao over to ask him what had happened.

Mo Tianliao briefly recounted the day's events. The tiger was so furious that he bit a vine in half.

An evolved spirit cultivator was no different from a human being; a young maiden being violated by wild beasts like this was truly inhumane. All it took was money for Liuyun Sect to stoop so low. Rumor had it that an elder had once experimented with his evolved spirit cultivator to see if a beast could bear children conceived with a human. He had elixirists concoct a great number of pills to aid conception and fed them to his spiritual companion.

Unsurprisingly, the answer was no—which cemented the belief of human cultivators that spirits, even evolved ones, could never be equal to humans.

"Those monsters are too inhumane!" Xuanji was so furious that he flung his heavy, sturdy shell to the ground hard. The cobblestone slab cracked.

The corner of Mo Tianliao's mouth twitched. "Shibo, your shell…"

"Hmph!" Xuanji picked up his shell and blew on it, then tucked it into his robe and stomped off in a huff.

"So, Xuanji braided ropes to protect his shell?" Once Xuanji had left, Mo Tianliao settled down on the cushion and took his cat into his arms.

Qingtong leaned against Mo Tianliao and yawned, compliantly letting him hold him. “Not at first.”

The tiger perked his ears up, too.

When Xuanji had still been little, he and his two fellow disciples often played together, and their master would throw a small ball for them to fetch. Tianlang was always the fastest, bounding merrily after it, while Qingtong often ignored their master’s teasing, although he would occasionally humor him by pretending to scramble for it. However, he was always too lazy to run back. He’d just climb on top of Tianlang’s head to ride him back. Tianlang always indulged his youngest junior, so he’d let him hold the ball as he merrily ran back with the cat on his head.

Only Xuanji was left huffing and puffing as he chugged along with his shell on his back. When he ran too fast his shell would drop, leaving only a snake slithering on the ground. *Now* he was fast, but their master said it didn’t count if you ran with your pants off. So the tasty reward went to Qingtong, who was the one holding the ball in his mouth.

Tianlang wasn’t all that fixated on the snacks; he just loved playing fetch. Seeing his junior taking his time savoring the food, he’d pester their master for another round. Xuanji was always left heartbroken, hugging his shell. He hadn’t meant to drop his pants. Really. His shell had fallen off on its own.

There were many other similar incidents, and after blow after blow, Xuanji finally came up with a plan—he’d secure his shell with hemp ropes. That way, it wouldn’t fall off again when he was running. But at first he’d tied it too tight, leaving only his head and tail sticking out, and he’d looked like a worm inching along on the ground. Not only had it been slow, it had been extremely undignified.

Eventually, Xuanji had discovered he could just strap his shell to his back, with his snake body underneath and the shell resting completely on top. That way, he’d be able to move both quickly and steadily.

After that, one could commonly see a snake with a tortoise shell on top panting his way after a running puppy with a kitten hitching a ride on top it.

Since ordinary hemp ropes were too heavy for him, Xuanji had decided to design a lighter and softer version. Thus, he had begun to studying rope-making, and eventually braiding them had become a habit.

Mo Tianliao fell silent for a moment. This was a truly pitiable past. So the hemp rope had initially served as his belt…

***

LATER THAT NIGHT, when Mo Tianliao saw the man beside him was sleeping, he quietly got up and put on his clothes. He summoned Taishi, who was pretending to be a candlestick on the bedside table, and unlatched the door.

“Where are you going?” asked a pleasant voice with a hint of drowsiness. Mo Tianliao looked back and saw the man on the bed lying on his side, holding out his arm to him lazily.

The gesture struck Mo Tianliao in the heart, sending tingling sensations running all over his body. He leaned over and kissed the outstretched fingers. “I’m going to steal a few Jadefruit. Be good and go back to sleep. I’ll be back before dawn.”

Fair, slender arms wrapped around Mo Tianliao’s neck, the intention clear—he wanted to go too.

Mo Tianliao shook his head. “No. That area is too close to the forest where they tame beasts. If they blow the Spirit-Disciplining Horn, you’ll get a headache.”

Qingtong turned into a cat and clung to Mo Tianliao’s collar in determination.

Man and cat were briefly locked in a stalemate before Mo Tianliao conceded defeat. Looking into those glass-clear eyes, he really couldn’t bring himself to refuse him.

Qingtong smugly burrowed into the front of Mo Tianliao’s clothes and hung onto the collar with just his little head peeking out. He swished his tail in excitement. Nights were the perfect time for hunting. The

mountain path was clear. As long as they didn’t stray off the main road, there wouldn’t be any issue.

The white jade steps glowed luminescent under the cold moonlight, while the luminous grass on both sides twinkled, presenting a beautiful sight. The cat jumped to the ground and pounced into the twinkling grass to frolic around. Mo Tianliao stopped to wait for him.

He looked up at the moon. Cold moonlight shone upon the mountain range, silent and tranquil. The path of cultivation was long and endless, and most of the time, it was lonely. Having someone along for company made a whole world of difference.

“What are you looking at?” The cat turned into a beautiful man and followed Mo Tianliao’s gaze. “The moonlight is lovely.” He reached out for the moon as he spoke.

The formless moonlight slowly flowed into itself like the flowing waters of a mountain stream; it turned into a crystalline band of light, cascading down to pool in his palm. His soft, wide sleeve slipped down, exposing a fair segment of his forearm. The moonlight wound around that beautiful arm and slowly merged into his body.

Mo Tianliao stared in amazement. The legend that powerful spirits could absorb the essence of the sun and moon was real!

The snow-white hem of Qingtong's robe fluttered in the wind as the moonlight enveloped his ethereal figure in a cloak of silk, giving Mo Tianliao the illusion that Qingtong might ascend to heaven at any moment.

"Qingtong!" Mo Tianliao strode over and grabbed his hand.

The moonlight around him slowly dissipated at the sudden interruption. Paying it no mind, Qingtong let it disperse and turned back to look at Mo Tianliao, his eyes like light-colored glass sparkling with tiny specks of starlight from the moon essence he'd just absorbed.

"What are you doing?" Qingtong gave him a puzzled look.

"Let's go." Mo Tianliao was going to say *I was afraid you'd fly away*, but on second thought, it sounded too silly. It might very well earn him a beating. He swallowed it back and silently pulled his cat away.

Qingtong tried to shake himself free, but to no avail, so he let Mo Tianliao pull him along while he trailed behind and looked around as he walked. His night vision allowed him to take in everything in the mountain forest clearly: the birds roosting in the treetops, rabbits crouched in the grass, and macaques hanging upside down from the branches.

"Mo Tianliao…" Qingtong called out to him.

"Hm?" Mo Tianliao responded softly as he walked up the path he remembered from that morning. They couldn't risk riding their swords, or they'd be discovered.

Qingtong didn't say anything else. Mo Tianliao didn't press further; he'd answered when called, and if Qingtong didn't continue, he wouldn't pry. They strolled along, walking hand in hand like a pair of mortals, feeling blissful even though they were doing nothing in particular. Feeling the warmth from Qingtong's palm, Mo Tianliao suddenly understood what

the mortals meant by living in conjugal bliss until a ripe old age. He could hold this hand and walk until the end of time without ever growing tired of it. If only this mountain path could stretch on forever, and they never reached the end.

"What did you mean by you 'couldn't help yourself'?" Qingtong asked after a moment of silence.

Mo Tianliao's steps faltered briefly. "It usually means a person couldn't hold their feelings back and couldn't stop themselves from following their heart's desire."

"Like burying your face in belly fur?" Qingtong looked at the back of Mo Tianliao's head. From his perspective, Mo Tianliao's penchant for nuzzling against fur was the same as Tianlang's love of gnawing bones—they had the same covetous expression of one completely unafraid of getting scratched.

"Similar, but also different." Mo Tianliao stopped and looked back at him. He took a slow step back to stand together with him. "When I said I couldn't help myself," he said softly, "it's because I love you *too* much."

He slowly leaned in and kissed those slightly parted lips.

MINI EXTRA

What Does 'Love' Mean?

Tianlang: Love is when a ~~dog~~ wolf finds a meaty bone!

Xuanji: Love is when the black tortoise finds a shell that doesn't fall off!

Pawpaw: Love is when a cat finds a scratching post that won't wear out!

Woodworker: …That's not what it means at all, dammit!

Chapter 65:
Love Pledge

QINGTONG STOOD THERE IN A DAZE, letting him kiss him. He didn't have a headache now, so why… Soon, his thoughts completely escaped him. The sensation of their souls connecting felt wonderful, and the shiver he felt in his soul left him wanting more. Slowly, he raised his hands and rested them on Mo Tianliao's shoulders.

Since he'd already gone all out, Mo Tianliao hugged him tighter and deepened the kiss. He lingered on those slightly cold, thin lips, gently prying them apart to taste the sweetness within.

Cultivators could convert their breath to internal breath, so even if they kissed for three days and nights, they wouldn't have to worry about running out of air. By the time the long kiss ended, the moon was already high in the sky.

Slowly, they separated. Mo Tianliao hugged the slightly limp Qingtong around the waist, supporting him as he lowered his head and gently wiped away the moisture on those lips with his thumb.

"Do you understand now?" He looked at those dazed glass eyes with a soft smile, not at all worried Qingtong would lose his temper. His cat had been thoroughly domesticated by him. He might scratch and bite him, but he would never leave him. And he'd shamelessly taken advantage of his cat's dependency on him, letting Qingtong get used to having liberties taken, and this sort of intimacy, little by little.

"Hm?" Qingtong, having just emerged from their soul connection, was still slow to react.

Mo Tianliao kissed those incredibly beautiful eyes. Settling down on a rock by the mountain path, he held Qingtong and slowly patted him on the back. "This is what I mean by 'unable to help myself.' Do you understand now?"

"Mo Tianliao…" Qingtong said softly, resting his chin on Mo Tianliao's shoulder.

Mo Tianliao hummed a response. His expression was calm and composed, but his palms were sweating profusely. His confession tonight had been purely on impulse. If Qingtong understood his feelings, then all was well and good. But if not, he'd…just have to try again another time.

Pursing his lips, Qingtong buried his face in the crook of Mo Tianliao's neck and sniffed his scent. Then he opened his mouth—and bit.

With a hiss of pain, Mo Tianliao stiffened and let him bite as he pleased.

"I'm a man, and so are you." Qingtong bit down again on that piece of flesh.

Mo Tianliao's erratically thumping heart leaped to his throat; he felt as if he was literally being held in those very teeth. "Um, it's fine. I'm human, you're a beast." If they needed to be different somehow to be together, then being different species instead of different genders would do.

The man compulsively biting his neck chuckled. He was right. If they were already ignoring their species, then why care about the rest? "I'm not your demonic companion," he pointed out.

"Of course not," Mo Tianliao replied quickly. "We've been together two lifetimes and we never signed a blood pact."

“I’m not some beauty in your harem either.” Qingtong bit down harder.

“Um… My darling, since when do I have a harem?” Mo Tianliao tried to look down at him, but he couldn’t move with his throat taken hostage.

“Those fire-tenders, iron-forgers, and Yuanmei, Luanyi, Ge Suxin…” Qingtong released his neck and began counting on his fingers. These were all renowned beauties in the demon realm who’d come to the demon palace under all sorts of pretenses, throwing themselves at Mo Tianliao. Every time he’d seen those women, Qingtong’s claws had itched.

The corners of Mo Tianliao’s lips twitched. He held the slender, counting fingers, surprised that his cat, who could barely count, could remember all those people so clearly. “Sweetheart, who even are these people you’re talking about?”

The counting man paused and looked up at him. “You don’t remember?”

“I don’t remember people, you know that.” Mo Tianliao leaned in and touched noses with him.

Cold eyes stared silently into Mo Tianliao’s, trying to read them, but all he saw was his own reflection and nothing else. Satisfied, he opened his mouth—and bit down on Mo Tianliao’s nose.

“All right.”

What did that mean? Mo Tianliao was too nervous to even feel the pain. “Is…that a yes?” he asked tentatively.

Qingtong released his nose and shifted his chin to Mo Tianliao’s shoulder, nibbling the side of his neck for a moment before lazily humming an affirmative.

The tingling sensation spread from his neck to his whole body. Mo Tianliao felt so euphoric he wanted to carry his precious snowball in his arms and run three laps around the mountain. In his excitement, he began kissing Qingtong wherever his lips landed.

“Ugh…” Qingtong pushed away the big head nuzzling him all over. “Didn’t you come here to steal something?”

Mo Tianliao froze. He'd completely forgotten his actual mission. After getting swatted by his beloved cat, Mo Tianliao gave a small cough and helped his precious cat up to his feet. But instead of looking at the path ahead, he looked at the gorgeous man under the moon.

With a slight frown, Qingtong transformed into a snow-white cat and leaped onto Mo Tianliao's shoulder.

Now that the view was gone, Mo Tianliao finally behaved himself and hurried on his way. The cat perched on his shoulder flattened his furry ears—ears that had already flushed pink.

Mo Tianliao still remembered the way to the Jade Mountain. And he had analyzed the spell arrays on the mountain in the morning and figured out how to break them.

Liuyun Sect trusted the spell arrays on Jade Mountain. There weren't many people standing guard, other than the two mid core formation stage disciples at the entrance.

Mo Tianliao withdrew his divine sense, gradually turning his body into a tree that blended into the mountain forest. The cat in his arms was enveloped within the trunk, leaving only his head exposed.

"Eh, did you see that tree move just now?" one watchman said to his fellow disciple.

"Probably the wind," his companion said dismissively.

A bare, leafless Undying Tree approached the garden one step at a time. Once it drew close to the two watchmen, it transformed into human form, and the powerful divine soul of a soul transformation cultivator immediately assaulted the two disciples' consciousnesses. The two didn't even get to cry out before their minds went blank and their eyes lost focus.

Mo Tianliao quickly darted inside and made a beeline for the Jadetree.

The area was riddled with spell arrays, but Mo Tianliao moved through them as easily as walking on flat ground. Earlier in the morning, he'd recorded the arrays on the jade slip, and he'd used that information to calculate every precise step he had to make and rehearsed it countless times in his mind. In no time at all, he stood before the Jadetree.

Several more arrays were carved on the trunk of the Jadetree, drawing on the power of a divine tree, a power so potent that any living creature that approached would be hit with a formidable attack. Only those with the corresponding talismans to break the array could emerge unscathed.

Mo Tianliao raised his hand and released Taishi, instructing him to fly up to the branches and touch the leaves. The jade leaves tinkled, but they didn't trigger the array. Mo Tianliao relaxed. It looked like the array didn't consider Taishi a living creature. That made things easier.

As a divine artifact bound to an owner, Taishi couldn't stray more than ten feet from Mo Tianliao's side. Even if it was used as an arrow or some secret weapon like a dart and was thrown over a hundred feet away, it would instantly return once the momentum was spent. This was also why Taishi never ran away despite being set on fire every day—it simply *couldn't.*

So Mo Tianliao had to bring it over and stand within ten feet.

Taishi excitedly circled the tree. Turning into a big mouth, he chomped down on a Jadefruit and gobbled it up. The fruit was crisp and hard, and when Taishi bit into it, it dropped jade flakes that glowed in the moonlight. For a divine artifact, nature's treasures were sustenance. But unfortunately, he was stuck with a stingy master who had only given him a tiny piece of Ninesouls Crystal in all this time. Now that he had access to the fruits of a divine tree, he naturally had to eat his fill.

After eating three in a row, Taishi let out a satisfied burp. Then he transformed into a sharp blade and sliced off another Jadefruit, before turning into a bamboo strainer to catch the fruit before it hit the ground. He flew over to deliver it to Mo Tianliao.

Mo Tianliao caught it and shoved it into an inventory pouch. Usually, one Jadefruit could be refined into three nascent soul elixirs. Folks from the cultivation world fought tooth and nail for a piece of Jadefruit, but this man and his artifact casually stole a whole sack before calling it a day. Mo Tianliao looked at the partially bald Jadetree and rubbed his nose. He stuffed the inventory pouch into the inventory bracelet on his cat's paw, resummoned Taishi, and hurried off.

Taishi looked at his master, then at the Jadetree, and turned into a big mouth again. Since they were leaving, he might as well eat one last fruit. *Chomp!*

Plucking his final snack, Taishi happily left with the fruit in his mouth, but a hum unexpectedly sounded—the array on the Jadetree had been activated!

“Yeeeeow!” Taishi shrieked as he fled the massive power of the array that slammed down at them. Mo Tianliao quickly erected a barrier to shield them.

Each of the fruits weighed a significant amount, and Taishi had focused on one side of the tree, making it lopsided. When he took that last bite, the top of the tree had tilted over, triggering the spell array.

Flaming rain descended upon them, burning the surrounding grass to cinders. Mo Tianliao quickly recalled Taishi and transformed into a streak of light to flee from the orchard. With the flaming rain destroying all the vegetation around them, he had nowhere to hide, and in three breaths, soul transformation cultivators would arrive.

Left without a choice, he risked stepping on the smaller arrays to break out in two breaths. The smaller arrays activated, sending beams of light shooting at him. With no time to dodge, Mo Tianliao shielded the cat with his back and took the blow.

Coughing out a mouthful of blood, he took advantage of the momentum of the impact to propel himself out of the orchard.

“Who goes there?” The two guards, having already regained their senses, attacked. Immediately after, an immense force came crashing down on him—the soul transformation elder was here.

Mo Tianliao instantly transformed into a withered tree, concealing his entire aura and sealing his divine sense within the trunk, wiping out all traces of his presence.

The cat was enveloped within. He crouched in the darkness of the hollow trunk, tilting his head to look at a green sprout in front of him, at the height of his eyes.

Meanwhile, Taishi, knowing he messed up, behaved himself and huddled in the corner with the Jadefruit, too timid to even make a sound.

MINI EXTRA

Woodworker: I’m just a tiny sapling.

Pawpaw: Need a little *moisture* there? Meow?

Woodworker: Oh, yes, yes. Come on, baby.

Tianlang: I’ll do the honor! *lifts leg, pees*

Woodworker: *speechless*

Chapter 66:
Legacy

THIS TINY GREEN SPROUT was Mo Tianliao's condensed soul, and save for two faintly glowing green leaves, it was bare. The cat tapped the emerald leaves, which folded together slightly, wrapping themselves around that soft, furry paw. Then Qingtong licked the leaves. He could sense that this was Mo Tianliao's divine soul, and though his instinct was to scratch it, he was afraid he might break it, so he just prodded it gingerly.

A divine soul shrunk down into a tender sprout was extremely fragile but also extremely sensitive. The touch of that tiny, barbed tongue sent an electrifying tingle through Mo Tianliao; it felt as if he was being scratched directly on his divine soul. He wanted to say something to his cat, but he had no mouth in his divine soul state.

Taishi, seeing this as his chance to redeem himself, cast aside the Jadefruit and turned into a tortoiseshell snake coiled around the sprout. Lifting his tiny mouth, he voiced what his master was thinking: "Get lost!" he squawked, repeating the words in its master's consciousness word for word.

The cat froze for a moment, then silently flashed his claws.

"Taishi, I'm talking about you!" Taishi added, faithfully relaying its master's thoughts. Then he turned his head to the side and replied, "Aw, come on, Master. Without me, you wouldn't be able to talk at all."

Qingtong crouched down, nonchalantly licking his paws as he watched the snake talk to itself.

"Just shut up!"

"All right, Master. I'll keep quiet. You say what you want."

"Baby, don't worry. Once the soul transformation cultivator leaves, we'll inch our way out of this forest."

"Meow…" Qingtong walked over and batted away the divine artifact, which he felt resembled nothing so much as a coiled turd. He curled up into

a ball beside the sprout and yawned lazily.

Silence hung over them. Mo Tianliao felt no need to talk; he savored the sensation of his divine soul being enveloped in soft cat fur. It was like he was lying naked on an endless expanse of soft belly fur, a feeling so wonderful that it brought tears to his metaphysical eyes.

“I swear I saw a shadow flash by,” came the voice of a Liuyun Sect disciple from outside the tree. “Where did it go?”

A vaguely familiar voice followed. “Go that way. The intruder must have used some kind of treasure artifact to make their getaway!”

“Peak Master Ding, what brings you here?”

The peak master of Liuyun Sect was similar to the person in charge of a sanctuary at Woyun Sect. It was a position mostly held by those with outstanding capabilities or high cultivation. Going by his surname, it sounded like the current peak master was a relative of Ding Zijin.

After a while, the footsteps receded. The person who had spoken earlier came back again and met up with another searching disciple.

“Any luck?” he asked.

“The elders are searching with their divine senses, and Peak Master Ding has brought along a treasure artifact that can ferret out living beings,” the second disciple sighed. “There’s no use for us here.”

The two disciples sat down beside Mo Tianliao to slack off. One leaned against his trunk and yawned. “It’s been so long since someone stole from the Jadetree. I heard the spell array was even a secret one Lord Duantian never taught anyone. How could someone crack it so easily?”

The cat scratched his ear with a hind paw and cast a disdainful glance at the sprout. Mo Tianliao shook his leaves. There was no way he would have designed an array this flawed. This place’s crude system consisted of a simple attack and alarm array erected with numerous threads of spiritual energy, where touching one triggered an attack and alerted the elders. Mo Tianliao found it facile, inelegant, and completely lacking in technique. If he’d been in charge of protecting this tree, he would have stacked an attack array with a trap array, along with an illusion array around the tree so the thief would misjudge the location and trigger the arrays.

When he'd been analyzing the array earlier, he'd specifically checked for the presence of an illusion array. There wasn't one. The entire array thus went from an iron cage to a bamboo fence—it was practically useless against him.

"Perhaps the thief is also Lord Duantian's successor?" the other disciple suggested, and both men burst into laughter. How many successors could Duantian have out there in the world? Even the authenticity of this Peak Master Ding was questionable.

The two disciples began gossiping about Peak Master Ding. Since neither tree nor cat could speak, they simply pricked up their ears to listen.

Peak Master Ding was one Ding Ziyu, a mid-stage nascent soul cultivator who had made tremendous contributions when he gifted a spirit beast-tracking treasure artifact to the sect leader. He had also set up various protective spell arrays for the sect; it was all thanks to him that Liuyun Sect, a sect that had previously never cared much for spell arrays, was currently well-protected with prohibitive spell arrays everywhere. Not long ago, the sect leader had made an exception and promoted him to peak master, an honor that even Ding Zijin, his elder brother of lawful birth, had never attained.

Unlike Woyun Sect with its numerous Blessed Sanctuaries, Liuyun Sect had fewer than ten important peaks. Most were watched over by elders at the soul transformation stage. Very few peak masters were at the nascent soul stage; only talents with outstanding capabilities or meritorious contributions would be awarded with such commendation. One could only imagine just how high Ding Ziyu's standing was in Liuyun Sect. No wonder Ding Zijin was so desperate for the Meteorfall Stone.

"Peak Master Ding is Lord Duantian's successor!" The two disciples were reverent when speaking of Duantian.

"Who would have thought when he was sent there as a plaything that he'd end up catching Lord Duantian's eye and inheriting his legacy?"

"Yeah," the other agreed and looked around before whispering, "Hey, do you think Lord Duantian and Ding Ziyu ever…*you know*?"

"Heh heh, who knows, right? Why else would he teach him so many skills? He even told him about the spell arrays in the demon palace!"

“Beauties truly do lead men astray…”

Seeing as it was getting late, the two disciples left to keep up with the pretense of searching for the thief. Meanwhile, inside the tree trunk, the white cat raised a threatening paw at the tender sprout.

Mo Tianliao raised his two leaves to plead for mercy. Cross his heart, he didn’t even remember who Ding Ziyu was! When was he supposed to have passed him his legacy? When had he ever had a thing with him? Lord Duantian himself didn’t even know, okay?!

After a couple of hours, the disciples from Liuyun Sect moved on to search elsewhere. However, Mo Tianliao could still sense the presence of the soul transformation elder, whose powerful divine sense kept on sweeping over him again and again. Once that divine sense finally moved away from him, he lifted his roots and inched toward the edge of the forest. Against the moonlit backdrop of the night sky with a bright moon and a smattering of stars, a bare tree crept.

“Shameless thief, where are you hiding?!” The elder from Liuyun Sect circled irritably in the air above to scan the area inch by inch with his powerful divine sense, checking every living creature in the forest. But he found nothing. The thief couldn’t have burrowed underground, could he?

When the frustrated elder left to report to the sect leader and had the sect check every guest who wasn’t in their room, Mo Tianliao revealed himself and summoned his flying sword to make his escape. As soon as he returned to human form, though, a muffled groan escaped his lips. He was injured; he probably wouldn’t be able to fly very fast.

“Hm?” The elder hadn’t gone far when he sensed something and doubled back. Panicking, Mo Tianliao forced himself to deploy his spiritual energy. Blood welled up in his throat, and he swallowed it back down—he absolutely couldn’t leave any trace of blood behind.

With a snort, Qingtong grabbed his collar and transformed into a streak of light to flee, returning to their courtyard in the blink of an eye. The elder never even caught a glimpse of them.

When they were back in the courtyard at last, Mo Tianliao let out a sigh of relief. Unable to hold it in anymore, he spat out blood and slumped

to the ground. Qingtong dragged him to the bed by his collar and stuffed a handful of elixir pills into his mouth.

Mo Tianliao swallowed them and blinked. “What did you feed me?”

Qingtong looked back at him with his glass-pale eyes. “No idea.”

Mo Tianliao resigned himself to it. At least the elixirs Tianlang gave Qingtong wouldn’t harm him. He leaned over and kissed those pretty eyes. “Your eye color has changed.”

“Hm?” Qingtong blinked, and those glass-colored orbs immediately turned black.

Today was the first day of the Three Sects’ Grand Summit. There would be a grand ceremony that they had to attend. Fortunately, Mo Tianliao’s injury wasn’t severe, and all it took was regulating his breathing for a moment for the dull pain in his chest to subside. Now that he could walk again, he rose to his feet.

Taishi, back in the form of a strainer, followed him slowly with a Jadefruit in his basket. Mo Tianliao turned back and looked at him in wordless silence.

Taishi trembled and ingratiatingly offered the Jadefruit to Mo Tianliao. When Mo Tianliao accepted, he turned into a big mouth. “Uh, Master, you can’t blame me for what happened last night. I was just trying to snag another fruit for our kittycat! The more Jadefruit he eats, the more stable his divine soul—yow, ow, ow!”

The big mouth erupted into flames and flew in circles around the room. With considerable effort, he managed to put out the fire. Seeing his master about to set him on fire again, he hid behind Qingtong—but before he could speak, he was frozen into a block of ice.

MINI EXTRA

Ding Ziyu: I am Lord Duantian’s successor.

Ding Zijin: Bah, you mean Lord Duantian’s lover.

Pawpaw: Spill it. What exactly is your relationship with him?

Woodworker: Who in the effing heck *is* this guy?!

Chapter 67:
Grand Summit

MO TIANLIAO WASHED UP, changed into a fresh set of clothes, and burned his clothes from last night. Once he'd made completely sure he hadn't missed anything that might reveal his traces, he finally followed his master out in high spirits.

The grand summit was held on Liuyun Sect's largest square. Four elevated platforms surrounded it, with the three major sects each occupying their own side and the fourth side left to the smaller sects. The platforms were made of white jade and furnished with seats and low tables laden with fresh fruits and fine wine. At the center of the platforms was a spacious martial arts arena, shaped like drifting clouds chasing the moon and divided into various sections.

The members of Qingyun Sect had been there for a while, each of them sitting all prim and proper and dressed in their uniform azure. Liuyun Sect, as the host, had naturally turned out in full force, with all the elders and peak masters in attendance; the only ones absent were the sect leader and the elder who was charged with guarding the Jade Mountain.

Xuanji slowly leaped up the platform and settled into his seat, keeping his head down and saying nothing. Huaqing was dressed extraordinarily flamboyantly today, in dizzyingly dazzling robes whose colors shimmered in the sunlight, while Yuli hugged a small water tank close and crouched beside Xuanji with both of his hands submerged in it.

Meanwhile, Zimo and Bailuo went around greeting the various sects and handing out their sect's gifts. A Qingyun Sect disciple who'd come to greet their sect noticed Yuli when he handed Qingyun Sect's gift over to Huaqing. "What is he doing?"

"Cultivating," Yuli replied, looking at him innocently. "As a…pure water element cultivator, I always feel terrible if I'm away from the water for even a moment."

Everyone sighed in admiration. No wonder Woyun Sect ranked among the three great sects despite its sparse membership. It was because of their dedicated attitude toward cultivating everywhere, all the time, that every member was strong.

Xuanji gave each person a tray of hemp rope in return and waved them away.

“Where is Qingtong-zhenren?” asked someone from Liuyun Sect, craning his neck to look around. He’d heard something had happened last night, and their elder had instructed them to keep an eye on the various sects.

Just then, a brilliant streak of white light flashed across the horizon. A snow-white robe made of silk woven by the merfolk billowed in the wind, its ten-foot-long hem shimmering with a luminescent glow.

This was a grand ceremony, and so Qingtong had made a special effort to dress up. While his clothes were still white, the borders had been embroidered with intricate, ornate light-blue cloud patterns. The iridescent merfolk silk refracted a colorful glow in the sunlight. Part of his dark hair had been tied up and secured with a jade crown, pinned in place with a light-colored glass hairpin.

The peach blossom blooms, radiant in its hues;
the fair maiden weds, in bliss may she smile.

The lotus gleams pure, pristine in its grace;
a sacred sight afar, none shall defile.[4]

The typical beauty was a feast for the eyes, the kind of sight you wanted to take a second look at. But the aura Qingtong gave off was so ethereal that even a first look was too much—it felt as if a mere glance would be sacrilege.

Mo Tianliao was very satisfied with the crowd’s reverence. This precious cat was his, and no one else was allowed to look!

With a light flick of his sleeves, Qingtong settled into his seat. Those who had been chatting on Woyun Sect’s platform earlier promptly fell silent and bowed their heads in greeting. Mo Tianliao dragged over a stool and sat beside his master, while the tiger conscientiously lay down on the footrest to serve as a cushion for his master’s legs.

Ignoring everyone else, Qingtong accepted the tea Mo Tianliao handed him and took a sip. Yuli shuffled away to the side, holding his water vat. Huaqing, too, moved as far as he could from Qingtong. The crowd took the hint and dispersed, and Zimo and Bailuo returned from their rounds.

Soon, the arena in the center rose to the sound of beating drums. A powerful aura washed over the crowd as Liumang-zhenren, the sect leader of Liuyun Sect, appeared on stage. “Apologies to have kept all of you waiting!” he laughed, although he didn’t look too good. Mo Tianliao arched an eyebrow. Half of Hooligan-zhenren’s sect treasures had gone missing; he wouldn’t have been able to mask his distress if he’d tried.

The Jadefruit sprouted once every thirty years, bloomed once every thirty years, bore fruit once every thirty years, and took yet another thirty years to ripen. All in all, a full harvest took as long as a hundred and twenty years. No wonder the folks from Liuyun Sect were so distraught.

The ten peak masters of Liuyun Sect sat in a row.

Elder Ding, as a highly experienced artificer, sat in the seat second only to the sect leader. His eldest son, Ding Zijin, sat behind him, looking up at Ding Ziyu, who was sitting at the last of the peak masters’ seats.

Ding Ziyu was an exquisite-looking fellow who’d inherited the alluring features of his deceased mother, who had been a vessel. His face was wan today, though, with no sign whatsoever of the high-spirited vigor he’d displayed when he first became a peak master.

Ding Zijin privately scoffed. The array Ding Ziyu had set up had been incomplete. The sect leader had felt confident enough to let him set it up because he’d insisted it was Lord Duantian’s treasure-protecting array, but now look what had happened. He must have gotten a tongue-lashing earlier in the morning; that was why he looked so awful.

“Thank you for gracing us with your presence here at Liuyun Sect today for the grand summit.” Liumang-zhenren addressed the crowd. “As all of you know, ever since the great battle between the immortals and demons, the three sects…” He went on to discuss events from the great war to the present day.

The great war had destroyed many sects and caused a drastic change in the spiritual energy of the universe. To survive in such a harsh

environment, the few surviving sects had banded together to form an alliance—the predecessor to the Three Sects' Grand Summit. Every so often, the various sects gathered together to exchange pointers, spar, and consult on major issues.

Liumang-zhenren's impassioned speech fired up many of the younger attendees. Qingtong, on the other hand, covered his thin lips with the back of his fair hand and yawned. He'd barely slept last night, and Liumang-zhenren's rambling was making him drowsy.

"Tired?" Mo Tianliao pulled his hand over and fiddled with it.

Qingtong turned to look at him, his eyes tearing up from the yawn, adding a touch of melancholy to his expression. "Yeah."

His gaze sent a tingle up Mo Tianliao's spine. Mo Tianliao clenched his fists, his veins bulging with effort as he fought back the urge to pull Qingtong into his arms.

"The main purpose of the summit is still the same—socialization and sparring. But there's another important aspect." Liumang-zhenren paused for effect, stroking his beard, before he continued with a hint of pride in his voice, "Three hundred years ago, when Lord Duantian perished, he left behind a demon palace no one could enter…"

Mo Tianliao, preoccupied with humoring his cat, paused and perked up his ears. What did his demon palace have to do with anything?

As it turned out, although the demon palace's grand array was breached from within, allowing in countless cultivators who'd besieged and killed Duantian, it had reactivated on its own after they left. Though it was damaged, its power was still not to be underestimated—and the entire palace was protected by arrays everywhere. Duantian had been obsessed with arrays, and there was a new one practically every step. Even the commode in the latrine had a teleportation array on it. Unsurprisingly, few of those who recklessly ventured in to probe the palace's secrets made it out unscathed.

The battle at Annihilation Valley had resulted in heavy casualties for the cultivation world. To prevent any further loss of the elites from various sects, the orthodox and unorthodox sects had joined forces and set up a

prohibitive barrier around Duantian's demon palace. Only those with special tokens had access.

"Come to think of it, that was your suggestion," said Xuanji, turning to look at the sleepy Qingtong. Mo Tianliao's eyes sparkled as he looked at his master, but Qingtong glared at Xuanji and snorted.

Mo Tianliao had to press his lips together to suppress a smile. He was surprised to learn he'd raised a watchcat to protect his house. However, this didn't seem in character for those people from the demonic path. "How did you get the demonic cultivators to agree?" he asked.

The talkative Zimo chimed in enthusiastically. "I heard the supreme demon lord intervened. He split up Lord Duantian's power, but left his demon palace alone, saying that the dead were long gone and they shouldn't push things too far."

Mingyan? Mo Tianliao frowned. He hadn't had many interactions with the supreme one. That man was so powerful he didn't even need the spiritual treasures Mo Tianliao forged. Not to mention the fact that he always lived in seclusion and hardly ever showed himself.

The supreme demon lord of the demonic path also had the responsibility of mediating conflicts between the various powers and maintaining the balance between the orthodox and unorthodox sects. Lord Mingyan rarely intervened, however, and the demonic path had always been a disorderly bunch. Mo Tianliao could never have imagined that this man would speak up on his behalf after his death.

Qingtong lowered his eyes, lost in thought.

Mo Tianliao held Qingtong's hand and whispered in his ear. "So that means our things are still there?"

Qingtong glanced at him. "Hard to say." While large groups weren't allowed to approach, every sect had a token, and they would often send array masters over to study the palace. Someone could have broken through the arrays and gotten their hands on their belongings.

On the stage, Hooligan-zhenren was still enthusiastically rambling on. Over the years, the various sects had sent array masters to study the ones at the demon palace. It had always proved futile, but this year, he said, they'd finally made a breakthrough. The sect leader beckoned to Ding Ziyu

in the final seat. “This is our newly appointed peak master. He’s the one who broke the array.”

Ding Ziyu walked over to stand beside Liumang-zhenren and cupped his hands in greeting. There, gleaming brilliantly in the sunlight on his wrist, was a blue bracer inlaid with gems. Mo Tianliao’s pupils contracted. That was his inventory bracer, the very same one that made a matching pair with Qingtong’s bracelet!

MINI EXTRA

Exploring the Demon Palace

Cultivator A: Wow, a thousand-year-old exalted tree.

Pawpaw: Put down my cat tree!

Cultivator B: Wow, a ten-thousand-year-old budding grass.

Pawpaw: Let go of my cat grass!

Cultivator C: *rolling over the floor* Omg, an entire room of galactic pearl sand—kyaaaah!

Pawpaw: My cat litter, reowrrr! Die, die die!

Chapter 68:
Competition

"I REMEMBER HIM." Qingtong narrowed his eyes. This person had been one of the numerous beauties people gifted to Duantian. Qingtong remembered him well because of his excellent aptitude. He'd originally been assigned as a fire-tender, but Mo Tianliao had later promoted him to work the forge, where he actually had the chance to learn a thing or two. Sometimes Mo Tianliao had directly drawn spell arrays on freshly refined ores, and he had also guided the people working in the forge every now and then.

Ding Ziyu had simply gone by Ziyu then, and Duantian had spoken to him—Qingtong lowered his head to think—ten times, at least. The more he thought about it, the more it infuriated him.

Sensing the murderous aura from beside him, Mo Tianliao stiffened. "I-is that so…?"

He remembered this person too. Most of the beauties people used to send to him had the physique and constitution of a vessel, but Ziyu had been special—he had the aptitude for artifact forging. And unlike the others, his eyes had rarely lingered on Lord Duantian. Instead, he had always stared at the refining materials with bright eyes, and he'd never had a word of complaint when he was assigned to tend the fire.

Later, when he'd been sent to the forge, he'd run into Mo Tianliao fairly often, and he'd plucked up the courage to ask a question or two. Lord Duantian was a notoriously temperamental person, but he'd always appreciated brave, driven people who strove to improve themselves, so he'd spoken a few more words to him than he normally would.

He'd always assumed this guy had been a tribute from the demonic path. Who could have imagined that he was the common son of a Liuyun Sect elder?! Now that he thought about it, though, Liuyun Sect had been the main force during the siege of the demon palace back then, which meant that whoever had sabotaged the grand protective array from within…

The corners of Mo Tianliao's mouth curled into a cold smile. So, there it was. He lowered his head and slowly pried open his cat's tightly clenched fist. "Traitors ought to be thrown into the furnace."

Qingtong pulled his hand away, not letting him touch. "There's more than one."

"I know." Mo Tianliao smiled. It would have taken more than a single person to breach his mountain-protecting grand array. It had to have been a coordinated betrayal by multiple people from the demon palace—and even then, only a corner of the array had collapsed, and of those people who'd swarmed into the demon palace like hornets, countless numbers had been slaughtered.

Nevertheless, since Mo Tianliao had reencountered this particular traitor, he really ought to throw him into the furnace.

"Oh, I know Ding Ziyu!" a common disciple standing behind them announced.

"I've heard of him too!" another female disciple chimed in.

Girls were always more interested in this kind of juicy gossip. Woyun Sect wasn't as strict as the other sects—even their dress code was relaxed—so they weren't going to stop their disciples from a bit of idle gossip.

What came from the mouths of these girls, though, was a story straight out of a romance epic. As the tales went, Ding Ziyu's mother was one of Elder Ding's concubines, not his principal wife, and so Ding Ziyu had never been a favored child from the moment he was born. Later, his exceptional talent had incurred the jealousy of his elder brother, the son of Elder Ding's main wife, who'd schemed to have him sent to the demon lord as their secret informer.

The Demon Lord Duantian—a man notorious for his volatile temper and savagery! That poor boy. Ostensibly gifted to Duantian as a vessel, he'd intentionally disguised his appearance to avoid humiliation and ended up being rejected by the big bad guy. He'd been sent away to tend fires and forge iron, but he hadn't let hardship get him down; he had done his best to learn. In one chance encounter, he'd found a chance to display his talent and won the demon lord's admiration. The demon lord had often guided him, and eventually, he'd even considered passing his legacy to him! Alas, fate

had other plans. Before Ding Ziyu had managed to learn all of Lord Duantian's skills, the demon palace had been besieged and destroyed.

Afterward, the young man, who had already developed a wide repertoire of skills, returned and made numerous meritorious contributions to the sect, eventually becoming a peak master at a young age…

Mo Tianliao strained his ears to listen to the female disciples' story, completely missing whatever Liuyun Sect's sect leader was saying. Such a dramatic story that supposedly involved him—so why didn't he remember a single thing about it? Ding Ziyu did have decent aptitude, he'd give him that, but he was far from being his successor.

"Quite a good story, though," said Qingtong, raising an eyebrow at him.

"They got it wrong." Mo Tianliao leaned in to clasp Qingtong's slender hand again, pinching the tips of those fair fingers. The smooth fingernails instantly turned into claws. "The evil demon lord in the story was missing a ferocious beast! The story still needs a ferocious beast who often bit people and always bullied the young man, stopping him from getting too close to the demon lord."

Qingtong pursed his lips. The whole demonic path had been aware that Demon Lord Duantian had a tiny cat for a demonic companion, one that couldn't fight or defend him and whose only apparent purpose was being pampered by Duantian as if it was a prince.

"…The first prize for the elixir concoction competition: an Oblivion Herb!" The sect leader of Liuyun Sect had finished announcing the procedures and moved on to the prizes.

Oblivion Herb? Mo Tianliao looked up at the platform, where Liumang-zhenren was slowly opening a green jade box. Even from this far away, Mo Tianliao could feel it teeming with spiritual energy. A greenish-yellow spiritual herb lay quietly within, shining brightly in the sunlight.

"Whoa, is Liuyun Sect actually giving that away as a prize?" Huaqing blurted out in astonishment.

The Oblivion Herb was an extremely rare poisonous herb. Only specimens over a thousand years old were really valuable, and anything under a hundred years old was completely useless. If you had one old

enough, though, this kind of herb could be used to concoct the Oblivion Elixir, which made the one who consumed it forget their past. For those who were too overwhelmed by their inner demons to ascend, taking an Oblivion Elixir to forget the past and start fresh was a potential way around the problem. But few dared to take an elixir like that without a compelling reason, and so they were rarely sold.

Taishi, who was in bracer form, abruptly started yelling in Mo Tianliao's consciousness. "The Oblivion Herb!"

Mo Tianliao furrowed his brows. "What about it?"

"It can serve as a substitute for Emperor's Repose," Taishi said seriously. "It's not as effective, but if we can't find the Emperor's Repose divine herb, we can use this instead." Emperor's Repose was one of the materials needed to heal Qingtong's divine soul; it functioned to cleanse the divine soul.

Oblivion… Mo Tianliao's frown deepened. The Emperor's Repose supposedly made one forget their troubles. If he found that divine plant and used it on Qingtong, wouldn't it mean that Qingtong would forget his past?

The first prize for the artifact-forging competition was a branch of the Jadetree. Every part of a divine tree was a treasure, and the Jadetree's branches were highly prized by artificers. It could also be used in elixirs, seeing as it was a plant. Huaqing didn't care for the Oblivion Herb, but he was very interested in the Jadetree branch, so he came to an agreement with Mo Tianliao: If Mo Tianliao won, he'd let Huaqing have the branch.

"You'll have to trade the Oblivion Herb for it," said Mo Tianliao, grinning.

Huaqing raised his chin slightly. "No problem." Among the orthodox sects, no one below the soul transformation stage could beat him when it came to concocting elixirs.

Elixir concocting and artifact forging were the two most important skills in the cultivation world. Elixirists and artificers were respected no matter where they went. The various sects each trained their own elixirists and artificers, and these skill competitions were always the main event of the grand summit.

The arena was split into two areas, with the east for the elixir competition and the west for artifacts. Liumang-zhenren raised and waved his hand, and countless jade walls rose from the floor of the arena to create dozens of small chambers, each with its own furnace.

Only those at the nascent soul stage and below could take part in the grand summit; masters at the soul transformation stage, mindful of their status, sat out.

“Flaming Flower Elixirist!” The crowd worked themselves into a frenzy when they saw Huaqing step into the venue. The last grand summit had been Huaqing’s first time participating, but he had ended up winning first place right out of the gate. Ever since then his name had reverberated all over the cultivation world, and the prices of the elixirs he concocted had skyrocketed.

Ding Zijin clenched the Meteorfall Stone tightly in his hand. His illegitimate brother had climbed to the peak master position riding on Lord Duantian’s coattails, and their father had praised his brother right to his face multiple times. He couldn’t lose this time! He had to show their father who his true successor was!

Ding Hu was the highest-ranked artificer of the orthodox path and a Liuyun Sect elder, so artificing was a popular skill among the disciples in the sect. More than a dozen Liuyun Sect disciples entered the arena for the competition. Qingyun Sect also had around half a dozen competitors.

The sect leader of Liuyun Sect laughed heartily. “Go on, Ziyu. You’re only at the mid nascent soul stage, you can still take part.”

The others side-eyed him. He made it sound like Ding Ziyu was bullying them by participating. Ding Ziyu respectfully bowed to the sect leader, acknowledging his order. He leaped humbly onto the artifact-forging stage and stood quietly in the first spot, looking determined to win.

Mo Tianliao, on the other hand, stayed right where he was, still fiddling with his master’s hand.

Both the artifact and elixir creating competitions had to have a theme. The competitors couldn’t make anything too complex in the limited time allocated, so the theme for the artifact to be judged this summit was simply

that it had to be a spatial artifact. When this was announced, Mo Tianliao sat up and looked at his cat.

“Do you still have that Darkvoid Ore?”

“You’re thinking of making *that*?” Astonished, Qingtong took a black stone out from his inventory bracelet. Lord Duantian had sought out this very material to make a cat house, and it was already partially done.

Mo Tianliao smiled as he gripped the stone in his hand. “Yeah, I have everything I need. Might as well finish it.” With that, he jumped down onto the platform, where he settled into an inconspicuous corner at the back.

Spatial artifacts were commonly known as inventory artifacts, and crafting one wasn’t particularly hard—although it wasn’t easy either, since the required spatial spell arrays were difficult to draw and easy to screw up. Choosing this as the theme made it easier to judge. The quality of an inventory artifact mainly depended on the capacity and stability of the spatial space, but you could also add some additional functions to earn bonus points, like the ability to resist lightning tribulations…

Ding Ziyu smirked. Spatial spell arrays had been Lord Duantian’s forte—practically every magical artifact he forged came with a spatial array. And Ding Ziyu had just so happened to learn a valuable method for crafting inventory artifacts. He was confident as he began his work.

In spatial arrays, overlaying a gathering array and trapping array could keep the spiritual energy in the inventory artifact from dispersing. That was why people carried spiritual herbs and fruits in jade boxes, to preserve freshness and prevent the spiritual energy from dissipating. The inventory artifact Ding Ziyu had learned about could both retain the spiritual energy and maintain the temperature; freshly picked spiritual herbs stored in these artifacts would remain fresh and tender no matter how long they’d been in there. To cultivators out on an expedition, this kind of thing was extremely useful.

Ding Zijin took out the Meteorfall Stone and prepared to craft a spatial artifact that could change form at will. Meanwhile, Qingtong propped his feet on the tiger and looked lazily at the arena. The participants couldn’t see each other due to the jade walls, but everyone on the platforms had a clear view.

While the other competitors were diligently drawing arrays and crafting inventory bracelets and rings, Mo Tianliao simply threw the Darkvoid Ore into the furnace and sat idly beside it, fiddling with things he'd brought with him.

He took out an inventory pouch from his inventory bracelet and poured out a pile of small trinkets. These had all been crafted from bits and pieces of materials, and each was only about the size of a fingernail. A closer look, however, would reveal they were made from rare crystals, black jade, Xuanyuan Iron, Meteorfall Stone, and the like. These were technically scraps, but the objects carved out of them were extremely exquisite. There were miniscule doors and windows, tables and chairs, beds, floor tiles, and even tiny bedsheets and tablecloths made out of merfolk silk.

These were all miniatures he'd carved in his spare time, each meticulously crafted. The Qingning Palace attendants, who also enjoyed making tiny items, had sewn the fabrics.

He was going to make a beautiful cat house, one where his distinguished cat could live in style.

Chapter 69:
Cat House

WHILE EVERYONE ELSE was hard at work refining materials and drawing arrays, Mo Tianliao was blithely carving away. The cat house still lacked a bathroom and Qingtong's favorite rocking chair.

This battle of skills lasted ten days and nights without pause. The arena was sealed under a barrier so that no one could enter or exit before the end of the match.

Glazed lanterns lit up the venue when night fell, but no one from any of the sects left. As the saying went, every sip and bite was cultivation in itself, so even if a spectator didn't study artifact forging or elixir concocting themselves, they could still gain enlightenment from observing.

Sect disciples typically avoided forming overly close personal relationships with members of other sects, but elders and peak masters of higher status weren't so particular. After all, social engagement was sometimes necessary for the sake of their sects' interests. As the host, Liuyun Sect had set up a banquet on their elevated platform and invited the various sects' elders to the feast.

Qingtong glanced at Mo Tianliao, who was enjoying himself, and gave Xuanji a kick. Xuanji reluctantly flew over to Liuyun Sect. The tiger stood up and shook his fur out before following him.

The Liuyun sect leader went around toasting the guests, and the elders of the smaller sects responded with nervous reverence. Outside of the three great sects, nascent soul cultivators were considered high-level. Most of these smaller sects' elders were cultivators at the nascent soul stage, and they naturally didn't dare to offend a great master at the soul transformation stage.

Qingyun Sect and Woyun Sect were seated across from each other, at the front. Each of them had sent two elders over. Yunsong was wearing a haughty expression, but when he saw Qingtong coming over, he stopped talking.

“Qingtong-zhenren.” Yunyuan, Yunsong’s younger fellow disciple, stood up and greeted Qingtong with a smile.

Yunyuan was the only woman among the elders of Qingyun Sect. She was both extremely talented and a renowned beauty in the cultivation world, having retained the pretty and charming appearance she’d had in her twenties as a mortal. As she smiled charmingly at Qingtong, she elbowed her senior beside her, signaling him to speak up.

Yunsong clicked his tongue, refusing to greet Qingtong. Not only had he been utterly humiliated at Woyun Sect, he was also sure the death of his grandson had been something to do with Woyun Sect, though he’d never found proof. Trying to get him to put on a smiling face was simply asking too much of him.

Qingtong sat down without sparing them a glance. The atmosphere was immediately awkward.

“Yunyuan-zhenren, still as pretty as ever, I see.” Xuanji made a flat attempt at small talk.

“That’s what you say every time, Xuanji-zhenren.” Yunyuan laughed despite herself, but although she was talking to Xuanji, her eyes were on Qingtong.

Yunyuan looked young, but in truth, she was over a thousand years old. She still didn’t have a cultivation partner. A century ago, the sect leader of Qingyun Sect had tried to propose a marriage alliance between Qingyun and Woyun Sect, and she’d taken a shine to the incomparably handsome Qingtong-zhenren as soon as she laid eyes on him. Unfortunately, her feelings were unrequited.

“Your tiger still hasn’t evolved?” Yunyuan sat down and pointed to the tiger lying by Qingtong. “I remember it having excellent aptitude.”

The tiger, who was focused on licking his paws, looked up briefly when he was mentioned before returning to what he was doing.

“My phoenix-tailed kite can already evolve into human form,” she added. She raised her hand, and a small bird with a long phoenix tail landed on her slender fingers. At her silent command, it flapped its wings and flew over to perch on the tiger’s head. Spirit beasts had their own way of

communicating, and a bond between soul companions could influence how their masters felt through their blood pact.

The phoenix-tailed kite pecked at the tiger's head. "You can already evolve. Why are you hiding it?" Cultivation also mattered among spirit cultivators; those with higher cultivation could see through those with lower cultivation. The phoenix-tailed kite could tell that the tiger's cultivation was on par with its own, so there was no reason it couldn't transform.

The tiger yawned. "I wouldn't get any big chunks of meat to eat in human form."

Just then, Zimo approached carrying a plate of meat he'd just grilled. He gave the tiger a roasted deer's leg and Qingtong and Xuanji a plate of sliced meat each. Zimo didn't just love to eat meat, he also enjoyed grilling it, and his grilling technique was even better than Mo Tianliao's.

The phoenix-tailed kite cocked its head at Zimo, then returned to pecking at the tiger's head. Everyone in Woyun Sect learned to conceal their aura when they joined the sect, and even when they were transformed to human form, their fellow spirit cultivators wouldn't be able to sense their true nature.

The tiger clutched his deer's leg and tore into it with gusto. The leopard that belonged to the Liuyun Sect elder in charge of sect affairs looked contemptuously at him. She had heard that the eunuchs of the mortal palaces were all fat because being castrated made them gluttonous, and it looked like that was actually true. High-level spirit beasts should only consume elegant animal feed pills. Gnawing on meat like this was beyond embarrassing; it was truly… Tsk, tsk, tsk.

The phoenix-tailed kite found this kind of ravenous behavior puzzling too. She circled once in the air, then transformed into a little girl with delicate features. She crouched by Yunyuan's feet and massaged her legs.

The tiger glanced at Yunyuan and roared at the little girl: *That old witch is so lecherous I'm surprised you're not a boy.*

The phoenix-tailed kite rolled her eyes almost imperceptibly. *Considering how boorish you are, that gorgeous master of yours wouldn't have eyes for you even if you transformed into a ravishing beauty!*

“Yunyuan-zhenren, that soul companion of yours is rather charming.” The sect leader of Liuyun Sect, who had come over for a toast, glanced at Yunyuan’s soul companion with a faint smile. He was even more sure now of his intent to become cultivation partners with Yunyuan. If he was to marry her, her spirit beast would become his to enjoy as well.

The tiger paused his meal and glanced at the cowering phoenix-tailed kite. With an internal sigh, he lowered his head and went back to eating. Xuanji took out his shell and polished it slowly with a cloth, wiping it until every groove shone. Qingtong wasn’t the least bit interested in all the unspoken social drama going on here. He sipped his wine and watched the arena in the distance.

With the enhanced vision of a soul transformation cultivator, he was able to see Mo Tianliao even from this far away. He watched him take out a piece of the Darkvoid Ore and draw an array on it with a finger enveloped by spiritual energy.

“We’ve made a total of twenty tokens this time. Qingtong-zhenren, will you be joining us? I’ve saved one for you.” Someone thrust a wine cup out in front of him, obstructing his view of his scratching post.

Cold eyes slowly looked up disdainfully at the man, who was smiling like a fool. “No.” Those twenty tokens were for the younger generations to fight over. Each major sect already had a spiritual token that allowed them access to the outer layer of the demon palace, although no one had used one for years out of fear of the demon palace’s arrays.

He finished the wine and stood up, lifting the tiger by the scruff of his neck. “I’ll take my leave. Enjoy yourselves.” With that he flew back to Woyun Sect’s platform, ignoring the group of hypocritical elders.

Meanwhile Mo Tianliao, still focused on the construction of his cat house, had no idea of what his cat was up to. While the ore was still malleable, he quickly attached the carved furniture, doors, and windows, and used his spiritual energy to shape the ore. It was like a child making a sandcastle, sculpting the shape and placing pebbles and leaves inside as furniture.

When the sun rose on the morning of the tenth day, the gong and drum that signaled the end of the match sounded.

Ding Ziyu calmly walked out of his forging chamber. He smiled when he saw his haggard-looking older brother. “Did you finish your artifact?”

“Just barely,” Ding Zijin answered with a forced smile. “Peak Master Ding seems confident. Why not present your artifact first and bring Liuyun Sect into the competition with a bang?”

Ding Ziyu flashed him a modest smile. “You think too highly of me, brother. I don’t deserve the honor.”

Ding Zijin was so disgusted by his brother that he couldn’t speak. He quickly stepped forward to place his forged artifact in the designated spot before stepping back.

Over twenty spatial artifacts were arranged neatly on a long table. The renowned artificers of the orthodox sects had all been invited to judge the entries, led by Elder Ding Hu of Liuyun Sect himself, while the elders from the other sects observed from the sidelines.

The quality of a spatial artifact was pretty easy to judge, since space, stability, and appearance were qualities that could all be directly compared. As the judges were evaluating a work, the artificer could step forward and explain any distinguishing features of their artifact. After Ding Hu evaluated and graded several inventory artifacts, his gaze lingered on a particular bracelet. “This…”

He knew this had been forged by his youngest son, but no matter how he looked at it, it was just an ordinary inventory bracelet. Though the space was large and the array was stable, there was nothing particularly special about it.

“This inventory bracelet is a little different.” Ding Ziyu stepped forward and took out a jade box. “This is a stalk of Witherleaf grass my disciple picked just this morning. Please return after viewing the rest of the artifacts, and you’ll see what I mean.” Taking it out of the box, he placed the grass inside the inventory bracelet.

It was common knowledge that harvested Witherleaf grass would wither within a quarter of an hour once it was no longer inside a jade box. Everyone was surprised as the implication of Ding Ziyu’s words sank in.

There were many jade boxes that could effectively preserve spiritual energy, but inventory bracelets that could do it were exceedingly rare.

With the suspense hanging over the competition, the crowd's interest in the remaining works waned. The theme may have been spatial artifacts, but to win the crown, one needed to stand out with a unique function.

Ding Ziyu raised his chin slightly and looked at his brother.

Ding Zijin sneered. When it was his turn, he explained, "This item may seem to be a simple inventory bracelet, but it can transform into other things."

He placed the glowing inventory bracelet in his palm. With just a thought, the circular bracelet changed into a hairpin. Another flick, and it turned into a delicate ring.

"Did you add the Meteorfall Stone and a collapsible spatial array?" Another artificer examined the ring, looking excited.

Ding Zijin smiled. "That's right."

"Impressive! Every generation really does outshine the last!" An artificer with a gray beard patted Ding Hu on the shoulder. "Master Ding's sons are both dragons among men!"

Ding Hu laughed with pride.

Four hours had passed by the time the judges finished looking at all the artifacts. They picked up Ding Ziyu's inventory bracelet and took out the Witherleaf grass. The tiny spiritual herb was still lush and fresh; a glistening dewdrop clung to it.

Everyone gasped in amazement. Grinning, Ding Ziyu explained, "This artifact uses a spatial array with a gathering array and a trapping array. It can preserve freshness and temperature. A freshly cooked meal placed within would still be piping hot after a month."

Combining a spatial array with a gathering array to prevent the spiritual energy in a space from dissipating had long been a theoretical concept in the artifact-forging world. It was the theoretical foundation for forging artifacts that could hold living creatures. Successfully achieving this could pave the way for the eventual storage of living creatures. If spatial artificing kept developing along this line, eventually one would even be

able to store humans, or spiritual fields, and ultimately create an independent world—a feat only gods could accomplish!

Ding Zijin's shape-shifting inventory bracelet paled in comparison. Ding Hu was pleased. This common-born son of his always brought him honor.

Just as they were about to award first place to Ding Ziyu, however, a disheveled figure in black robes rushed forward, carrying a black object. "Apologies, everyone. I overslept."

Mo Tianliao had been so exhausted after he'd forged his artifact that he fell asleep. By the time he woke up, the jade walls around him had been lowered, and he could see his cat sitting on the judging platform in the distance, glaring at him.

The Darkvoid Ore produced black ink during the refining process, so Mo Tianliao's face was streaked with ink stains. The object in his hand was just as inky. He looked like someone who had gate-crashed to cause trouble.

"You missed the deadline." Ding Hu frowned at the man before him. An artificer was supposed to be refined; this slovenly appearance was a disgrace to their craft.

But Ding Zijin spoke up for him. "He must have been too focused on forging. He's the only participant from Woyun Sect, so why don't the elders give him a chance?" He'd rather hand first place on a silver platter to some other sect than let that bastard get his way.

"Yeah, let's just have a look." Ding Ziyu felt that something was familiar about this disheveled figure whose face he couldn't see clearly. Victory was as good as his anyway—he didn't mind defeating yet another competitor.

The crowd looked at Qingtong-zhenren, who was observing from the back. Woyun Sect only had this one artificer, and it felt unreasonable to deny him his chance, so they motioned for Mo Tianliao to present that black thing in his hands.

Mo Tianliao placed the object that resembled an incense burner on the jade table.

“What is that?” Ding Hu frowned, unwilling to touch the ink-stained object.

Mo Tianliao straightened his clothes and smoothed his disheveled hair. “May I have a pot of clear water?”

A maidservant from Liuyun Sect quickly brought over a pot of clear water. Mo Tianliao first used it to wash his face before pouring the rest over the “incense burner.” The cascading water scoured away the dark ink, revealing a crystal-clear miniature palace.

The Darkvoid Ore was actually transparent once the ink was purged in the refining process. While the artifact was only the size of an incense burner—small enough it could be held with two hands—every detail, from the upturned eaves and ornate tiles to the carved beams and painted rafters, was exquisitely crafted, like a real palace. Through the crystal walls, they could see the furnishings inside, from tables and chairs to the bed and incense burners to low tables. A rocking chair carved out of crystal sat in a small pavilion, and sheer curtains made of merfolk silk even hung around the bed. Even if this hadn’t been an artifact, the craftsmanship alone was the peak of artistry.

The judges gathered around the exquisite miniature palace, marveling at this godly masterpiece. But Ding Ziyu couldn’t keep his eyes on the table. Instead, his gaze was locked on the handsome face that had now been cleansed of ink. Sharp brows, bright eyes, and chiseled features so impeccably handsome they were almost otherworldly…

It was a face he’d never forget even if it were burned to ashes—the face of Lord Duantian!

Chapter 70:
Champion

"WHAT MANNER OF ARTIFACT is this?" Several judges gathered around to marvel at the exquisitely crafted crystal palace—but the theme for today's contest was spatial artifacts, not sculptures.

Mo Tianliao smiled. "A spatial artifact, of course."

"But a spatial artifact like this isn't practical." Ding Hu frowned, still favoring his son's creation.

The other judges nodded in agreement. Spatial artifacts were mostly used for storage. Along with a large storage space, it had to be convenient to carry around. That was why these artifacts were typically inventory bracelets, rings, or simple pouches to hang at the waist. How were you supposed to carry around something that you had to carry with both hands?

Mo Tianliao picked up the little crystal palace and privately observed everyone's reaction. As an artificer in his previous life, he had often spent the whole day holed up in his demon palace crafting artifacts and rarely ventured out. While those from the unorthodox path dealt with him frequently, very few from the orthodox paths ever had, and those who had known him had all perished at Annihilation Valley.

As he expected, the crowd didn't show much reaction to his appearance. Most were staring at the artifact in his hands. There was only one person who couldn't stop looking at him, and he didn't even need to check to know who it was. He looked up at Ding Ziyu, just in time to meet his gaze before the guy could look away.

Ding Ziyu's eyes betrayed his shock, his doubt, and most of all, his fear. He instinctively covered his wrist with his sleeve.

Mo Tianliao held up the tiny palace with one hand. "The space in a spatial artifact isn't limited to merely the inside and outside. Internal changes are called compression, while external ones are called expansion." He glanced at Qingtong and winked.

Those cold, beautiful eyes carried a hint of a smile as they looked back at him in anticipation.

Mo Tianliao's heart fluttered. He suddenly didn't feel like showing these people his cat house anymore. He should have found somewhere private and covered his cat's eyes to give him a surprise. Who could say, he might have even gotten a sweet kiss in return! Or maybe His Feline Lordship would have been so delighted he would have dragged him into the house and allowed him to personally heal his divine soul…

"What exactly are you trying to say?" an impatient artificer blurted out when it looked like Mo Tianliao wasn't going to explain.

Mo Tianliao snapped out of his thoughts and swallowed his own drool. Raising his hand, he flung the crystal-clear miniature palace into the air.

The crowd jumped in fright, and one female disciple shouted in alarm at how casually he threw such a fragile thing. But all of them lapsed into silence as the object the size of an incense burner expanded to the size of a bronze furnace and landed solidly in the arena. The furnishings inside grew along with it, with the bathtub becoming the size of a wooden basin and the bed turning as big as a cushion—just right for a little cat to live in.

Exclamations of amazement erupted all around the arena, drawing the attention of everyone from the elixir-concocting side.

Mo Tianliao took out a spiritual stone and extracted the spiritual energy within, but instead of absorbing it, he directed it into the crystal palace.

Boom! With a thunderous roar, the palace the size of a bronze furnace instantly became a real palace, thirty feet high, a hundred and fifty feet wide, and three stories tall. The furnishings inside were still visible through the crystal-clear walls, fixed to the floor or walls with the same crystalline material. Every piece was so exquisitely crafted that they could even see the intricate openwork carving on the low tables and the crackled glaze of the jade flower vases on the table.

The first floor was a grand hall with ornate tables, chairs, and couches. The second floor was the bedroom, with floors covered in cushions and a spacious bed surrounded with fine, sheer merfolk silk. The

top floor was a terrace set up with a rocking chair and a swing. The rocking chair was mounted on two tracks, and as they all looked on, it was still rocking back and forth from the movement of the expansion. Even the people from the elixir-concocting arena came over to gawk.

"This…" Ding Hu and the other artificers were so stunned that it took them a while to find their voices.

"I-it's a mobile celestial palace!" an artificer who loved studying ancient texts exclaimed in amazement. He rushed over to the center of the arena, touching the smooth walls with trembling hands.

Legend had it that in ancient times, immortals had been able to refine their palaces into spiritual artifacts that could shrink and expand at will, allowing them to use celestial palaces whenever and wherever they so desired.

Seeing other people also intending to rush over and touch it, Mo Tianliao quickly retracted the spiritual energy. The thirty-foot-tall palace instantly shrank back to the size of an incense burner and returned to Mo Tianliao's hand.

"Sorry, this treasure artifact is still unstable; it sometimes reverts on its own," he said, lying without batting an eyelid.

When they heard that it was a treasure artifact, and an unstable one at that, everyone felt disappointed but secretly relieved. The artificer who'd read ancient texts sighed regretfully. The celestial palaces in the legends had all been extremely precious celestial artifacts. After Duantian's death, there'd never been another celestial artifact in Taixuan. Everyone wanted another genius like Duantian to show up and forge them new spiritual treasures and magical artifacts; even if the prices were high, at least wealthy individuals would still be able to purchase them.

No one felt this more keenly than those great masters about to undergo the tribulation stage, who lamented the loss of artifacts that could resist lightning tribulations. Not just anyone could forge an object like that.

Recovering from his shock, Ding Hu tried to salvage the situation. "The theme is spatial artifacts, though," he said. "While this celestial palace is rare, it doesn't quite fit the criteria." He'd noticed his youngest son's ashen face, and assumed he was distraught from losing out on first place.

It was a logical assumption. Liuyun Sect held Ding Ziyu in high esteem; they called him a rare talent who had inherited Lord Duantian's legacy. It would be really humiliating if he lost to someone nobody had ever heard of.

The other Liuyun Sect members chimed in in agreement. Artifacts that could be enlarged were hardly unheard of. Ding Zijin's inventory bracelet, which could change shape, worked on similar principles. Strictly speaking, this should be called a transformation artifact rather than a spatial artifact.

"Whether or not it changes size, a spatial artifact is still a spatial artifact," declared one bearded artificer with white hair. He shot a glance at Ding Hu and snorted. "Frog in a well."[5]

"Master Di is right." The artificer who'd studied ancient books finally calmed down and spoke up in agreement—though it was unclear if he agreed with what Master Di said about the nature of spatial artifacts or his jab about Ding Hu's ignorance.

Ding Hu's face darkened, but he knew he couldn't lose his temper. Master Di was an independent cultivator, but he had a great deal of prestige among the orthodox sects, a prestige that rivaled that of Ding Hu himself. If Ding Hu hadn't been the elder of a major sect with a large following, Master Di would have been the top artificer of the orthodox path.

"The young will indeed surpass us in time." Master Di patted Mo Tianliao on the shoulder. "In my opinion, this lad is the undisputed champion."

"I'd like to buy this treasure artifact," the ancient books enthusiast put in. "My friend, name your price." He couldn't wait to secure the celestial palace. As it was only a treasure artifact, he assumed it wouldn't be too expensive; he was willing to pay the price of a spiritual artifact to get the chance to study it.

"Woyun Sect hasn't had an artificer for years. May I know who your master is?" asked Ding Ziyu, suppressing his panic. He could tell that the man before him was only at the mid core formation stage. If Duantian had come back to life through forcible possession, and if he had an intact divine soul, three hundred years would have been plenty of time for that old devil

to return to the soul transformation stage; he shouldn't still be at this level. But these astonishing artifact-forging skills…

Everyone's expression changed at that question. Woyun Sect indeed had no artifact-forging masters, and not one of the judges present was from Woyun Sect. Where had this man learned artifact forging?

Mo Tianliao glanced at Ding Ziyu, then ignored him to address the excitable artificer. "This is a birthday gift for my master. It's not for sale." With that, he strolled to the platform and presented the crystalline palace to Qingtong.

Qingtong looked at him and slowly accepted the gift.

This cat house was something Mo Tianliao had promised to make for him three hundred years ago. It was easy enough to shrink objects by adding a few spatial arrays, but enlarging them was more difficult, as it required the use of an invaluable Darkvoid Ore. The Darkvoid Ore was a kind of celestial-grade material. Just a tiny piece could weigh a thousand catty, though it could be enlarged to a massive size. Mo Tianliao had spent decades refining this incredibly heavy Darkvoid Ore so that its weight would compress into the space as well when it shrank. This Darkvoid Ore left sitting in Qingtong's inventory bracelet was already halfway to a celestial artifact by itself, so this time, Mo Tianliao had merely attached the small objects he'd been carving and wrapped them with the ore before refining them. As such, the miniature crystal artifact before him actually was a celestial artifact, one which would be his den from now on.

"When I was young, I was a fire-tender in Duantian's demon palace. I received some pointers from Lord Duantian and picked up some superficial knowledge," Mo Tianliao explained briefly with a smile. He felt quite pleased when he saw his cat obediently putting the cat house away into his inventory bracelet.

A commotion broke out among the crowd. Lord Duantian again!

With the sole exception of Ding Hu, the other renowned artificers all felt that Mo Tianliao's celestial palace was the best artifact. After all, Ding Ziyu's preservation function could easily be achieved with a jade box, while a celestial palace that could expand in size was unique. Creating space that could contain living creatures remained just a theory; this mobile celestial palace that was already a reality was far more practical.

And so Mo Tianliao emerged the victor, winning himself a branch of the Jadetree and a large box of spiritual stones.

Ding Ziyu returned to his seat looking gray. Everyone was looking at him differently now. Had they really thought this guy was the inheritor of Lord Duantian's legacy? Sure, Ding Ziyu was better than the average artificer, but the difference wasn't actually all that significant. This Artificer Mo claimed he'd gained only some superficial knowledge from Lord Duantian, and he was much more impressive than Ding Ziyu, the supposed successor. If that Mo fellow had been a fire-tender, then what exactly had Ding Ziyu been doing in the Duantian demon palace? Perhaps he had been nothing more than an iron-caster!

MINI EXTRA

Cultivator A: Are all fire-tenders this impressive?

Woodworker: Yeaaah!

Cultivator B: Does that mean Lord Duantian is invincible, then?

Woodworker: More than just invincible. He's also dignified and extraordinarily handsome, an unrivaled, one-of-a-kind perfect man!

Qingtong: Barf—

Woodworker: What's wrong, my darling?

Qingtong: Ate too much cat grass, feeling a little sick.

Chapter 71:
Access Token

THE CONTEST ENDED. Huaqing unsurprisingly emerged victorious in the elixir competition and took the box with the Oblivion Herb back with him to the Woyun Sect's platform. His colorful robe swept through the air, light and graceful.

"As expected, no one but Elixirist Hua can pull off such flamboyant outfits," the female disciples from the other sects whispered.

"I always thought men looked ugly in bright colors, but Elixirist Hua changed my mind."

"I heard he's only a little over a hundred years old!"

Huaqing stood tall and upright, staring straight ahead with his chin slightly lifted as he nodded in acknowledgment of those adoring gazes. As he neared Woyun Sect's platform, though, a white figure streaked toward him.

It was Qingtong-zhenren, appearing out of the blue to drag Elixirist Hua away. The crowd, thinking he was just showing concern for an exhausted junior, sighed in admiration at the camaraderie within the Woyun Sect.

But Qingtong smacked Huaqing hard, sending him falling face down on the Woyun Sect platform. Cultivators were tough and sturdy, and a fall like that wouldn't cause any serious injury, but…it really hurt!

"Shizun, save me!" Huaqing turned to his own master for help. Xuanji stopped his braiding and glanced up at his disciple. He elbowed Yuli, who was crouching beside him playing with water, and signaled him to help his senior up.

Yuli took one look and glared at his master in disbelief. Him? Save his senior? *Shifu, are you sure you're not sending me to my death?*

Unable to count on his master, Huaqing hugged his head and stayed perfectly still on the ground. This wasn't his first rodeo. As long as he

didn’t move around, his shishu wouldn’t hit him again.

Qingtong kicked his motionless junior, but then got bored and returned to his seat.

The corner of Mo Tianliao’s lips twitched as he went up and patted Huaqing, who was still playing dead. “Shixiong, did you bring the Oblivion Herb?”

Huaqing, with his face still pressed to the ground, held a jade box up to him. Mo Tianliao took it and replaced it with the jade box that held the Jadetree branch. Once he returned to his seat, he opened up the box. A pretty stalk of grass lay inside, with leaves like bird feathers made up of many tiny fronds.

“This is the Oblivion Herb?” Mo Tianliao asked Taishi.

“Yeah, if you eat this, you’ll forget the past.” Taishi didn’t dare transform with so many people around, so he responded in Mo Tianliao’s mind. “Are you sure about this? If you feed this to your cat, he might forget you.”

Although the Oblivion Herb was a rare spiritual herb, it was in a different league from Emperor’s Repose. Emperor’s Repose could cleanse a person’s mind of worries, but the Oblivion Herb could make you forget *everything*.

Mo Tianliao frowned. “What about Emperor’s Repose, then?”

“It’d be a little better. But if you’re the source of his worries, he’ll still forget you,” Taishi said bleakly.

Mo Tianliao pressed his lips together and put the Oblivion Herb into his inventory bracelet. Love bred fear and sorrow—that little furball was supposed to be carefree, but he’d been pining for him for three centuries. He himself was Qingtong’s greatest source of sorrow. If Qingtong were to forget him and all their precious memories… Just the thought of it made him feel as though his heart was being ripped apart.

He would never take that step unless absolutely necessary. Since his precious one had said yes to him, perhaps the simpler method of mending the soul that wouldn’t hurt either of them might be better after all…

Mo Tianliao snuck a glance at his master beside him.

Qingtong, head propped up on his hand, glared at him sidelong. “What are you looking at me for?”

“Nothing. I just wanted to look.” Mo Tianliao leaned closer and reached out to pat the top of his head. The chairs Qingtong and Xuanji were sitting on had very high backs, so the disciples behind them couldn’t see their little gestures.

“Mo-shishu, did you really tend fires at Duantian demon palace when you were young?” a clear, crisp voice asked from behind them.

Mo Tianliao’s hand paused in midair before withdrawing. Inwardly cursing these tactless little brats, he turned around and flashed them a breezy smile. “Technically speaking, not exactly.”

“Huh?” The female disciple who asked had clearly been pushed forward by the others, and the answer stumped her.

There were dozens of meditation cushions behind the elders’ seats, occupied by the respective disciples of the three participating major sects. A few of the disciples wore expressions that said, *I knew he was just bragging.*

Mo Tianliao looked up to see Ding Zijin walking over with a box. A pale-looking Ding Ziyu tagged along behind him. Mo Tianliao smiled. “Tending fires and casting iron were just a part of my daily duties,” he said. “My primary job was to serve Lord Duantian’s most beloved.”

“Huh?” The disciples’ curiosity was piqued. “But I heard Lord Duantian didn’t have a cultivation partner.”

“Lord Duantian’s beloved was a snow-white cat,” Mo Tianliao said to the disciples as he reached under his master’s sleeve to hold his concealed hand. “My main task every day was to tend to that cat’s daily needs.” Sharp claws scratched his hand under the long sleeves. Mo Tianliao winced, not from the pain, but from the tingling sensation that ran from his palm to his spine.

Ding Ziyu scoffed. “Lord Duantian treasured that cat like his own life. He never let anyone touch it.”

Mo Tianliao looked up and glanced imperceptibly at the hint of blue peeking out of Ding Ziyu’s wrist. He smiled. “You were always tending to

the fires then, so you wouldn’t know what went on in the inner palace.”

“You—!” Ding Ziyu’s face flushed red. Everyone was already doubting his status as the demon lord’s successor. When he’d heard his brother was coming over to Woyun Sect’s side to meet with Mo Tianliao, he had followed without a second thought to see if this guy was the real deal—and he’d spoken up just now when he saw what seemed like a good chance to prove himself.

“Oops, I misspoke.” Mo Tianliao slapped himself on the forehead as if he’d just remembered something. “You did work the forge later.”

Ding Zijin fought back his laughter. He hadn’t won first place, but the bastard had totally humiliated himself, and that put him in a glorious mood. “Here, this is what I promised you before.”

Mo Tianliao took it and swept his divine sense over it—contained within was a Jadefruit. He lifted an eyebrow in surprise. The Liuyun Sect had lost more than half of their Jadefruits, and yet Ding Zijin had still managed to get his hands on one. He was clearly a capable guy.

Ding Ziyu stared intently at Mo Tianliao’s face, trying to discern if this guy was Lord Duantian reborn. But he’d never really had that many opportunities to see Duantian in the demon palace. While he still remembered his face, he wasn’t familiar with his mannerisms or way of speaking.

Mo Tianliao ignored him. The fish had already taken the bait. He wasn’t in a rush. After exchanging pleasantries with Ding Zijin, he saw them off and returned to his seat. Then he opened the jade box and took out the fresh Jadefruit.

“A Jadefruit?” A sharp-eyed Huaqing, who was hiding off to one side, caught sight of the fruit in the box and sprang up, his eyes shining. “Shidi, where did you get it?”

“Traded materials for it.” Mo Tianliao waved away Huaqing’s grabby hand. “This is for my shizun.”

Huaqing froze at the mention of Mo Tianliao’s master. He slowly turned his head to meet a pair of cold, beautiful eyes. In his excitement, he’d completely forgotten he’d run back into his shishu’s hunting range.

Mo Tianliao took out a jade knife and cut the Jadefruit open. The crisp, hard flesh was firm, and even when the blade sliced through it, it didn't ooze juice. The entire fruit looked just like an ice sculpture that would drop flakes of ice. Frowning, he summoned Taishi and turned him into a tortoiseshell fruit knife. The indestructible artifact cut through the fruit like a hot knife through butter, and soon, the Jadefruit had been sliced into a plate of cut fruit.

"Try it," Mo Tianliao coaxed, presenting the plate to Qingtong.

Qingtong picked up a piece and put it in his mouth. It was essentially tasteless but surprisingly crunchy to chew—perfect for sharpening his teeth.

Huaqing stood rigidly in place, watching helplessly as Qingtong munched on the precious Jadefruit like it was a simple snack. "Uh, Shishu…" At least leave him a tiny piece! With his elixir-concocting skills, he could surely refine it into a nascent soul elixir!

"Hm?" Qingtong popped the last piece into his mouth and looked up at him.

Huaqing trembled. "Uh, n-nothing."

Finishing his entire plate of dental chews, Qingtong turned to look at Mo Tianliao, his pretty eyes shining in anticipation of possibly receiving another plate.

Mo Tianliao's heart melted at the sight. He'd give Qingtong the world, but taking another fruit out now would be like turning himself in to Liuyun Sect for fruit theft. He whispered into his master's ear. "This isn't the place and time for it. Tonight, okay?"

"You can only have one per day," Fruit Knife Taishi reminded his master mentally, from where he was lying on the plate.

"Right. You can't have too many, or you'll get a toothache." Mo Tianliao held down the cat paw that was trying to fish out more Jadefruit. It seemed like he couldn't leave those Jadefruits with Qingtong.

"It's not about toothaches!" Taishi couldn't take it anymore. He sprang up to transform into a mouth, but Mo Tianliao deftly caught him and turned him into a bracer to put away.

“I know,” Mo Tianliao told him. “It has to be slowly absorbed and digested. I was just trying to coax the cat. Don’t tell me you thought I meant it.” His mental words dripped with contempt.

Taishi fell silent. Next time this happened, he wouldn’t say a word even if he were burned to death.

The crafting competitions ended, and next up was the main event, the spellcraft combat competition.

“As everyone knows, Duantian was the top artificer of the unorthodox path—or even in the whole of Taixuan. His demon palace was filled with spiritual treasures and spiritual stones, rivaling even the ancient abodes of the immortals. With this access token, one can freely enter and exit Duantian’s demon palace.” Liumang-zhenren held the token up. “Our Liuyun Sect has spent three centuries mapping out the demon palace. All the mechanisms and fortifications in the outer palace are marked. Whether or not you can make it into the inner palace depends on your luck.”

Magic blocked the way at every turn in the demon palace. By now, both the unorthodox and orthodox sects had jointly erected an additional barrier that allowed access only to token holders.

Mo Tianliao smirked. They claimed to have studied ways to break the arrays, but the truth was that his grand protective array hadn’t been reinforced with spiritual stones for years. After three hundred years, it was probably already on the verge of collapse, which must have given people the impression that there was an opening for them to exploit. One thing was certain, though: There were far too many arrays and traps in the demon palace, and someone had come up with the idea of sourcing human test subjects to scout the way ahead—which led to this contest scheme. These tokens were probably also being distributed by people on the unorthodox path.

“Darling, why didn’t you replenish the spiritual stones in our home?” Mo Tianliao teased Qingtong. Since learning Qingtong had protected the demon palace, he’d felt pretty reassured of its safety—until a few days ago when His Feline Lordship had mentioned that the spiritual stones for the grand protective array were probably running out. That was when he’d realized Qingtong hadn’t set foot in the demon palace this entire time.

“I don’t know the way,” Qingtong said coolly, lowering his eyes.

Mo Tianliao was startled. But when he thought about it… All the arrays and mechanisms in the demon palace were deactivated for Pawpaw, yes, and His Feline Lordship had free access throughout the palace. But he was so pampered that he'd never take more than a few steps without meowing insistently for Mo Tianliao to carry him. He had never actually walked through the demon palace himself.

"You won't go back if I'm not there to carry you around?" Mo Tianliao's eyes sparkled with a smile. Even if Qingtong didn't know the way, he still could have gone in to look around. After all, none of the arrays would hurt him.

Qingtong leaned back against his tiger cushion and closed his eyes. "That barrier can only be passed with a token. Go and fight for one."

Just then, an attendant from Liuyun Sect approached with the jade slips for drawing lots.

Mo Tianliao picked one at random, but the attendant told him, "That's for nascent soul cultivators. You should pick one of these."

There were two kinds of jade slips in the tray: yellow for core formation cultivators, white for nascent soul cultivators. Mo Tianliao was holding a white slip.

Qingtong opened his eyes and looked at him. "You could compete against the nascent soul cultivators if you wanted. It's not impossible." Mo Tianliao technically had the skills to defeat an early nascent soul cultivator, although it would be a tough fight.

But Mo Tianliao didn't hesitate to put down the white jade slip and pick a yellow one. Why would he waste the extra effort if he could win a token easily? Better to secure a spot quickly and come back to keep his cat company.

The arena was huge, divided into eighteen sections. Participants only needed to win one match to proceed to the matches on the second day.

Mo Tianliao competed in the second of today's matches, located in a zone farther away from Woyun Sect. He waited for the gong to be sounded three times, and then took his time descending into the arena.

“I am Chaoleng from Qingyun Sect.” The man standing opposite him wearing Qingyun Sect’s cultivator robe cupped his hands in greeting. Chaoleng was another mid-stage core formation cultivator.

Mo Tianliao recalled that this generation of disciples from Qingyun Sect had the word *Chao* as their generation name; combined with *leng* this guy’s name meant “super cold.” He returned the greeting: “Mo Tianliao from Woyun Sect.”

No sooner had he finished speaking than a water dragon lunged at him. Instead of dodging, Mo Tianliao waved his hand, conjuring a large tree with a lush canopy. The tremendous impact snapped the thick tree trunk, and the weakened wave crashed over Mo Tianliao, drenching him completely. Mo Tianliao struck back, waving forward three wooden spikes. Water sustained wood: The sharp spikes tore through the water effortlessly in a triangular formation, aiming straight for his opponent.

Chaoleng thought he’d gotten the upper hand when his opponent didn’t manage to dodge in time, but before he could complete his water dragon move, three wooden spikes imbued with spiritual energy burst out of the water, flying right at his vital points. The spikes were fast, taking advantage of the spiritual energy in the water. Startled, Chaoleng turned the water before him into solid ice.

Mo Tianliao broke through the water, thrusting a tortoiseshell sword toward the ice. Chaoleng sneered. His ice wall was thick and sturdy. There was no way that forty-inch sword could break through it.

When it came into contact with the ice, though, the sword transformed into a long spear that pierced through the ice wall.

Shocked, Chaoleng quickly abandoned the ice wall. He went to attack while the spear was still trapped in the ice, but the spear turned back into a sword and sliced through the ice wall. Several vines simultaneously swarmed toward him.

Core formation cultivators typically needed to pause for a moment after every move, which was why Chaoleng had been fighting how he had. But his opponent’s attacks had no transitions at all; one move followed right on the heel of the last, leaving him no room to counterattack.

Not daring to underestimate this man, Chaoleng summoned his spiritual treasure, a blue crescent blade, and slashed at the vines. At the same time, he launched a barrage of icicles at Mo Tianliao. Mo Tianliao grabbed one end of the vines, and roaring flames raced along them toward Chaoleng, burning him and melting his icicles.

Chaoleng had initially assumed this man was a wood-element cultivator when he saw him using wood-based spells. He wasn't expecting him to have the dual attributes of wood and fire, so he was caught off guard and got burned. He quickly summoned water to extinguish the flames, but Mo Tianliao was already upon him and kicked him out of the arena.

"Thank you for going easy on me." Mo Tianliao raised his hands in a casual salute and flew back to the Woyun Sect platform on his sword.

Chaoleng lay dazed on the ground. It was a while before he recovered enough to look at the others. Had he lost the match as soon as it started?

To Mo Tianliao, ordinary core formation cultivators were easy opponents, and he won his matches easily for three days in a row. It didn't take long before he advanced to the top twenty, securing himself a token. After they'd won a token, the top twenty could continue to compete for additional prizes, but Mo Tianliao decided he'd call it a day.

Meanwhile, Ding Ziyu touched the bracer on his wrist. He was growing more and more anxious as he watched Mo Tianliao breeze through match after match. In the end, he decided to walk over to the Woyun Sect platform. Whether or not this man was Lord Duantian, he had to be eliminated as soon as possible!

Chapter 72:
Overt Conspiracy

"WHAT CAN I DO FOR YOU, Peak Master Ding?" Zimo, who was in charge of receiving guests, stepped forward and greeted him warmly.

Ding Ziyu smiled. "I have a great obsession with the art of artifact forging, and would like to ask fellow cultivator Mo for some pointers."

Everyone nearby looked on with curiosity, surprised that this guy was so tactless as to come looking for Mo Tianliao when he had already been implicitly exposed as a liar—he wasn't Lord Duantian's true successor.

Mo Tianliao fed his master, who was leaning against the tiger, a small fried fish. Once Zimo had questioned Ding Ziyu at length, Mo Tianliao finally looked at him. "I'm not talented or worthy enough to offer you pointers, Peak Master Ding."

Ding Ziyu walked over, still smiling. "I heard you're not participating in the upcoming matches. There are still a few days left to the grand summit—why not come for a visit to the forging chamber on my peak?"

Mo Tianliao lowered his head and scooped tea leaves from their jade jar with a wooden spoon. He put them into a teapot, heated the water in the kettle with his fire-element spiritual energy, and poured it into the teapot to rinse the tea. He performed the entire sequence of tea brewing—rinsing, washing, steeping, brewing, and skimming—in one fluid, eye-catching motion. Once the tea was ready, he took out another cup and poured the tea in, repeating the process twice to lower the temperature. Finally, he offered the tea to the gorgeous man beside him.

Qingtong accepted the cup and brought the tea to his lips. The temperature was just right, so he took a sip.

Seeing his master drinking it, Mo Tianliao shifted his gaze away from the cup and gave Ding Ziyu a passing glance. "Sorry to have kept you waiting, Peak Master Ding, but I can't stop in the middle of brewing tea for my master."

Ding Ziyu privately clenched his fists and held back his temper. He was a nascent soul cultivator and a peak master to boot, and core formation cultivators usually treated him with the utmost respect. Even if this man was Lord Duantian, he was just a mere core formation cultivator now. What gave him the right to put on airs before him?

“Of course, the tea for Zhenren shouldn’t be taken lightly.” Ding Ziyu maintained his gentle smile as he stepped forward and “inadvertently” revealed the bracer beneath his sleeve. “I have several relics of Lord Duantian here. Would you like to look at them?”

Mo Tianliao glanced at his wrist, and his expression went cold. He glared at him.

Ding Ziyu nodded and telepathically transmitted a message to Mo Tianliao: *Tonight at midnight.* Meet me at Jade-Refining Peak.

There was a moment of silence. Then Mo Tianliao gave a slight nod of his head.

Once Ding Ziyu had left, Mo Tianliao suppressed the fury in his eyes and sidled up to his cat with a cup of tea to watch the matches together. The spellcraft combat matches didn’t run into the evenings, so once the sun set, everyone returned to their quarters to rest.

Mo Tianliao followed his master back to their courtyard. After he’d heated the bathwater he went to call his cat for a bath, only to find Qingtong lying on the bed, gazing, mesmerized, at the miniature crystal palace.

“Time for your bath, sweetheart.” Mo Tianliao went over and wrapped his arms around that slender waist.

Qingtong ignored him and poked the crystalline wall with a slender finger. “The walls are transparent. Won’t everyone see everything if I sleep in there?”

“It can change color now that it’s refined.” Mo Tianliao picked up the lazy Feline Lordship. “I’ll show you after your bath.”

“I can walk by myself,” Qingtong protested, struggling in Mo Tianliao’s arms. Ever since he’d said yes to Mo Tianliao, the guy had gone back to treating him the same way he always used to treat his cat. Even when he was in his human form, Mo Tianliao would insist on picking him

up after just a couple of steps. If there hadn't been so many people around during the day, he was sure Mo Tianliao would have carried him all the way back.

"The bathroom floor is wet." Mo Tianliao fobbed him off with a random excuse and happily carted the beautiful man off to the bathroom. There, he helped Qingtong take off his outer robe—a separate piece of clothing made of merfolk silk. The white, wide-sleeved robe underneath, however, was transformed from his fur. Mo Tianliao removed Qingtong's waist sash and pulled off the robe, which instantly vanished. Next, he reached into the inner garment, only to get his hand slapped. He retracted his hand sheepishly. "Let me help you take off all—"

Qingtong leaped into the bathtub with his remaining clothes on, and his white inner garment disappeared as soon as his alluring body was submerged in the water. Mo Tianliao's eyes nearly popped out, though regrettably, he didn't get to see much.

"Aren't you supposed to meet Ding Ziyu?" Qingtong glanced at him.

"Yeah." Mo Tianliao took out a soft cloth, dampened it, and slowly wiped the arm resting on the edge of the tub. "Kiss me, and I won't go."

With a snort, Qingtong pulled his arm away and rested against the bathtub with his eyes closed. *Go if you want.* I couldn't care less!

Mo Tianliao smiled and gently kissed away the water droplet on Qingtong's chin, but… "Ahh!"

Qingtong bit Mo Tianliao on the chin and kicked him out of the bathroom. He scooped up some water and washed his own chin. *So stupid.* I've just washed myself clean, and you come slobbering all over me. How am I going to finish washing up at this rate?!

***

DING ZIYU STOOD with his hands behind his back on the terrace of his own peak, his expression grave and stern. Behind his back, one hand slowly caressed the inventory bracer on the opposite wrist. This bracer was

extremely important to Lord Duantian. If that man was really him, he would come to demand it back. And since he was only at the core formation stage, it would be easy for Ding Ziyu, a nascent soul cultivator, to kill him.

Dark clouds obscured the moon, shrouding Liuyun Sect entirely in shadows. On this dark and windy night perfect for murder, at midnight when the yin energy was at its peak, Ding Ziyu foretold Mo Tianliao's fortune—ominous!

The killer lurked in the darkness, waiting patiently for his prey, while his prey…

***

MO TIANLIAO FINISHED his bath and stretched out comfortably on the bed beside Qingtong.

"Come on, give me a drop of blood." Mo Tianliao extended a hand to his cat.

Qingtong looked at the hand with his head cocked, then reached out his finger, extended a sharp claw, and stabbed.

Mo Tianliao hissed in pain as a drop of blood welled up on his fingertip. "I meant yours!"

Mixing his blood with Qingtong's, Mo Tianliao drew an array in the air with the blood and flicked it into the crystal palace. The celestial artifact lying quietly on the bed floated up and spun in the air.

Now that it'd been refined, the celestial palace could shrink even smaller, to the size of an egg. Mo Tianliao summoned it into his palm. "You haven't fully recovered, so don't put it in your dantian. Just toss it into your inventory bracelet."

Celestial artifacts required a large number of spiritual stones to activate, and the spiritual energy in the dantian wasn't at all comparable. Keeping it in the dantian actually just made it easier to retrieve.

Qingtong rested his head on Mo Tianliao's shoulder and hummed in acknowledgment. He felt tired now that he'd been lying down for a while.

Pinned on the bed, Mo Tianliao saw an arm, still flushed from the recent bath, reach out lazily toward him. The meaning was all too clear: *Put it away for me.* This cat was becoming lazier and lazier. Since he couldn't move anyway, Mo Tianliao grabbed the miniature crystal palace on the pillow and stowed it away in the inventory bracelet.

The dark sapphire-blue inventory bracelet looked pretty sitting snugly against that fair wrist. Mo Tianliao couldn't help but plant a kiss on that forearm, only to receive a smack to his head.

"I just bathed. Don't dirty my fur." Qingtong rolled over onto his back and closed his eyes.

The corners of his lips twitching, Mo Tianliao scooted closer to hug him. The fresh fragrance of Qingtong's body after a bath almost made him lose self-control. "My darling…"

"Hm?" Qingtong opened his eyes to look at him, his clear irises free of blemishes. In those beautiful eyes, Mo Tianliao saw the aggravation of an exhausted man, his annoyance at having his sleep disrupted, and a longing that even Qingtong himself wasn't aware of.

Before he'd confessed his feelings, Mo Tianliao hadn't dared read too much into it, but now that they had let each other know, he could see so much more in those eyes than before. His heart inexplicably ached. Gently, he dropped a kiss on those pretty eyes. "Nothing. Let's sleep."

Dual cultivation was a path of mutual harmonization**.** When two people of unequal cultivation dual cultivated, the lower-level one had to be used as a cultivation vessel; otherwise, the ensuing backflow of spiritual energy would cause harm to the higher-level one. Until Mo Tianliao returned to the soul transformation stage, he would just have to endure it. Even with a beauty in his arms, he didn't dare to take too many liberties, or he'd end up suffering if they acted on their desires.

Qingtong yawned and nuzzled against Mo Tianliao's neck, his arm draped across his chest. "Aren't you going?"

"When did I ever say I was going?" Mo Tianliao pulled the blanket over them and extinguished the candle flame with a flick of his finger. He

mentally reviewed the dual cultivation technique between the great spirits in ancient times.

He knew Ding Ziyu had laid a trap for him, so why on earth would he walk into it? Besides, he had to bathe his precious cat and lull him to sleep. He didn't have the time to go around meeting up with people who didn't matter.

***

ON THIS DARK AND WINDY NIGHT perfect for murder, Ding Ziyu waited in vain atop the mountain peak for the entire night.

***

THE NEXT DAY, a few Liuyun Sect disciples intercepted Mo Tianliao on the way to the grand summit.

"Our sect lost several Jadefruit a few days ago. May we ask you to come with us, Fellow Daoist Mo?" The disciples flashed the token their sect leader had given them.

Mo Tianliao frowned. "What does that have to do with me?"

"This is a matter of great importance," the disciple in the lead said with a forced smile. "Every single cultivator who showed interest in a Jadefruit has to be questioned. Please come with us so you can clear your name."

There were many others on the mountain path, and disciples from the other sects were also being escorted away. Refusing to go with them would just make him look guilty. Mo Tianliao informed his master and followed them away.

Earlier this morning, Peak Master Ding had suddenly informed the sect leader that he'd found a way to ferret out the thief. Given the

importance of the Jadefruit, Liumang-zhenren had ordered the match to be temporarily suspended and all suspicious individuals to be rounded up immediately. As Mo Tianliao had asked Ding Zijin for a Jadefruit—and Ding Ziyu had seen the Jadefruit exchange hands—he'd become one of the prime suspects.

As they walked down the mountain and through the forest, a white blur darted out from behind them. Sensing it, Mo Tianliao turned and caught the snow-white cat that had leaped at him. "Apologies, this is my soul companion. He ran off to play just now."

The disciples looked at the cat but didn't remark on it. As a core formation cultivator and artificer who was favored by his master and part of a major sect, it was only natural for him to have a soul companion.

The disciples from Liuyun Sect led them through several twists and turns before coming to Liuyun Sect's grand hall. Liumang-zhenren and Ding Hu were both present, and Ding Ziyu stood beside the sect leader with a gloomy look on his face.

A Liuyun Sect disciple-in-charge addressed the gathered disciples from other sects. "The thief triggered an array that Peak Master Ding set up on Jade Mountain. Everyone here just needs to exchange a few moves with Peak Master Ding, and we'll be able to determine if they are the thief who stole the fruits."

Mo Tianliao quirked the corner of his lips. So, Ding Ziyu's attempt to scheme against him had failed, and now he wanted to come at him openly? He planted a kiss on the furry head draped over his collar. This would be the perfect time for him to reclaim his inventory bracer.

MINI EXTRA

Shizun: Why are the walls transparent?

Woodworker: So I can still watch when the cat sleeps inside!

Shizun: What if the cat is in human form?

Woodworker: Uh…

Taishi: Then you can do naughty things against the wall!

Woodworker: Don’t say it out loud, you idiot!

Chapter 73:
Severed Hand

As the jadefruit was used to concoct the nascent soul elixir, useful only to those attempting to form a nascent soul, everyone who had been summoned here was a core formation cultivator. The crowd grew uneasy when they heard they were going to have to spar with Ding Ziyu.

"We're only at the core formation stage," one Qingyun Sect disciple complained. "How can we possibly compete with Peak Master Ding?"

"You're not going to use this as an excuse to kill us, are you?"

"Everyone, please calm down. It's just a friendly sparring match, nothing more." Liumang-zhenren smiled. "I still have to preside over the grand summit, so Elder Ding will stand in for me. As for your masters, I'll explain it to them."

What was happening today was indeed a bit out of line, and as the sect leader, he'd invite criticism if he stayed any longer. He left with a flick of his sleeve, handing things over to Ding Hu and his son.

Even though the core formation cultivators were displeased, they didn't dare cause a scene; after all, Ding Hu was a soul transformation elder. All they could do was steel themselves to trade blows with Ding Ziyu.

"Step forward when your name is called," the disciple-in-charge from Liuyun Sect said, holding a bamboo slip. "Chaoleng of Qingyun Sect."

To Mo Tianliao's surprise, the first name called turned out to be the one who had competed against him just days earlier. Chaoleng's expression soured as he stepped forward slowly and cupped his hands to Ding Ziyu in greeting.

Ding Ziyu stood with one hand behind his back, looking very much the picture of a senior. "Just attack me with your usual moves."

Chaoleng conjured forth a water dragon that lunged at Ding Ziyu. Ding Ziyu summoned a fire dragon twice the size of the water dragon. It

collided with the water dragon and devoured it whole before surging forward to lunge at Chaoleng. The circulation of spiritual energy was much faster for a nascent soul cultivator than a core formation one, and there were no pauses between moves. The fire dragon forged straight ahead, seemingly about to devour Chaoleng.

Chaoleng summoned forth a wall of ice and rolled aside—but the fire dragon dissipated the instant it touched the ice wall.

“Pardon my offense.” Ding Ziyu smiled, gesturing that Chaoleng could leave.

The other disciples were reassured to see that it had actually really just been a friendly spar. One by one, they stepped forward to trade moves with Ding Ziyu.

Mo Tianliao was fourth in line. Everyone before him had been disciples of Qingyun Sect.

“Mo-shidi, your turn,” whispered another Woyun Sect disciple behind him who had been summoned too. He was an ordinary inner disciple under Xuanji’s tutelage, and he’d joined the sect way earlier than Mo Tianliao, which was why he called him shidi. “Would you like me to hold your cat for you?”

Mo Tianliao looked back at his bearded fellow disciple and shook his head politely. Extracting the cat from his arms, he set him on the nearest tree. The snow-white cat scampered up and vanished into the lush canopy.

Ding Ziyu looked at Mo Tianliao with the ghost of a smile. “You missed our meeting last night. Were you in the company of a beauty?”

“Why would you say such a thing, Peak Master Ding?” Mo Tianliao dug a finger in his ear. “My master already has me betrothed. Please don’t say anything that could lead to misunderstandings.”

“You…” Ding Ziyu was dumbfounded. Yesterday, to keep things secret, he’d telepathically transmitted a private message to Mo Tianliao—no one else knew about it, so he couldn’t publicly accuse Mo Tianliao of playing him.

The crowd traded looks. Mo Tianliao was handsome, and he’d made quite a reputation for himself during the grand summit. Now, with his twist

on Ding Ziyu's words, their minds strayed in a more suggestive direction. No wonder Ding Ziyu kept harassing Mo Tianliao lately: He'd taken a fancy to the man.

Who would have thought? A Liuyun Sect peak master had actually taken a shine to a man—and one taller and more masculine than he was at that. Those rumors that Ding Ziyu had once been Lord Duantian's lover had become even more believable.

Ding Hu, who had been standing at the side, cleared his throat to remind Ding Ziyu to cut the crap. He knew his son's own capabilities—if Ding Ziyu had really inherited Duantian's legacy, he'd have unraveled the way to forge a divine artifact long ago. He'd claimed his son was Duantian's successor as a means to hide the fact that he'd sent his son to be a plaything to vie for power within the sect.

The grand summit had been intended to provide the stage for Ding Ziyu to shine, but Mo Tianliao had stolen his limelight. So, when Ding Ziyu had told him this morning that Mo Tianliao was going to expose him as a liar, he quickly agreed with his son that the man had to be eliminated.

"We took part in the grand summit to foster goodwill among the three sects," said Mo Tianliao. "Yet now we've been accused of theft and dragged here to spar with a cultivator a whole stage higher just to find the culprit. Liuyun Sect's hospitality truly…exceeds expectations." Mo Tianliao stood with his hands behind him. He didn't make a move; he could sense a powerful divine sense probing him, and of everyone present, Ding Hu was the only soul transformation cultivator. If Mo Tianliao turned to look at him he'd give himself away, so he feigned ignorance and started a conversation to stall for time while he came up with a plan.

With his mid-stage core formation cultivation and soul transformation divine soul, it wouldn't be hard for him to kill Ding Ziyu despite the disparity in level, but against a soul transformation cultivator, his odds of winning were low. More importantly, he couldn't let Ding Hu find out he was a high-level cultivator who'd possessed a new body.

Although the cultivation world now held the deceased Lord Duantian in high regard, that was due to his great achievements in artifact forging. During the fight in the demon palace and Annihilation Valley, he had slaughtered half the elites from both the orthodox and unorthodox sects. If

they knew he was still alive, it was impossible to say how many cultivators would come after him seeking revenge.

Following his little speech, the other core formation cultivators who'd been dragged here began to complain too. Some of them were supposed to participate in the final round today. If they exhausted their spiritual energy here, they would be at a disadvantage during the match. And as they looked around, they realized that not a single Liuyun Sect cultivator had been accused.

"We're wasting our energy here while Liuyun Sect's disciples get preferential treatment!"

"So, this is all a plot to let their disciples win. How devious."

"Our sect's treasure is missing. What is a mere competition worth in comparison?" Ding Hu scoffed. "If we find the thief and recover our lost treasure today, of course we'll compensate everyone."

The prying divine soul withdrew as soon as Ding Hu was distracted with speaking. Mo Tianliao instantly made his move, turning Taishi into a broadsword as he charged at Ding Ziyu.

Since they were both high-level cultivators with divine souls, the flurry of blows using the power of their divine souls clashed back and forth like red beans and green beans mixing together. If one hadn't been focusing on the disparate beans at the beginning, separating them out now would be impossible.

Caught by surprise, Ding Ziyu was almost hit, but he immediately summoned a spiritual sword to block the blow. As a gifted artificer, Ding Ziyu possessed the dual spiritual attributes of earth and fire—just as Duantian had in his original body. As flames enveloped his longsword, countless earthen spikes broke out of the ground.

The biggest difference between a nascent soul cultivator and a core formation cultivator was that a nascent soul cultivator had the aid of their nascent soul in their energy core. They could use multiple spells simultaneously, while a core formation cultivator could only use one at a time. But this didn't deter Mo Tianliao. He turned the broadsword in his hand into a silver spear and jabbed the tip into the ground, using the momentum to vault up into the air and dodge the earth spikes. In midair, he

transformed the silver spear into a tortoiseshell bow with a sole arrow. He drew it and fired.

Ding Ziyu erected an earthen wall to block it, but the unstoppable arrow penetrated the forty-inch-thick earthen wall, aiming right for the center of his forehead. He quickly retreated and made a hand seal, erecting wall after wall of earth before him, but the arrow effortlessly pierced through three walls in a row before its force was spent. It instantly returned to Mo Tianliao's hand.

Before Ding Ziyu could catch his breath, Mo Tianliao nocked another arrow and let it fly. Infuriated, Ding Ziyu mobilized his spiritual energy and erected an earthen wall ten feet wide. At the same time, he unleashed a fire dragon at Mo Tianliao.

Mo Tianliao dodged, but the fire dragon pursued him relentlessly. He was standing on a newly forged flying sword with no offensive power to speak of; all it could be used for was for flying. But since it had been pared of all additional functions, it was extremely light, agile, and fast. Carrying Mo Tianliao, it reached the top of the earthen wall even before the arrow struck.

Less than ten feet from its master Taishi could control its body. The tortoiseshell arrow pierced through the earthen wall, then—as if it had eyes—changed direction and flew straight toward Ding Ziyu again, piercing through his shoulder.

Never in Ding Ziyu's wildest dreams had he expected this arrow could change course. Ignoring the pain, he commanded the fire dragon to devour Mo Tianliao and hurled out the spiritual sword in his hand, using his divine soul to control its movements.

The tortoiseshell arrow returned to Mo Tianliao's hand and merged back into the bow. Then it split in midair, turning into twin swords that engaged Ding Ziyu's spiritual sword in battle. The spiritual sword had to be controlled with Ding Ziyu's divine soul, but Taishi was close enough to Mo Tianliao that he could fight on his own without his master's guidance—which he did with relish. This freed up Mo Tianliao to focus on handling the fire dragon.

Countless withered trees shot up from the ground, diverting the fire dragon. The wood ignited on contact with the fire, and the inferno instantly

ruined the fire dragon’s form and assimilated it into the endless flames.

Everyone else retreated to avoid being scorched.

As Ding Ziyu had only one divine soul, he couldn’t afford to split his attention to control the fire dragon while still focusing on the spiritual sword. When the fire dragon lost its form, it lost the ability to direct itself. Mo Tianliao, himself a fire-attribute cultivator, raised his hands to channel his spiritual energy, gathering the blazing fire to draw a yin-yang symbol in midair.

The blaze surged toward the flame-shaped yin-yang symbol, which absorbed all the flames, resembling a gourd filled to the brim with wine. With a push from behind, the flames erupted, and the giant flaming yin-yang hurtled straight toward Ding Ziyu. Mo Tianliao popped a few revitalizing pills into his mouth. His spiritual energy couldn’t keep up, and he needed to concentrate all his focus on absorbing the spiritual stones.

The core formation cultivators waiting for their turns were dumbfounded. Was this supposed to be a friendly spar? It was more like a fight to the death!

Ding Ziyu had no choice but to recall his spiritual sword as he blocked the blow with an earth-element spell. Fire strengthened earth, so the earthen wall became even more solid when the fire scorched into it. But this was no issue for the tortoiseshell twin blades, which returned to Mo Tianliao’s hand and fused into a greatsword. Mo Tianliao cleaved it down at the wall with all his might. The sturdy earthen wall cracked. Mo Tianliao raised his hand to strike down at a terror-stricken Ding Ziyu.

The Supreme Ultimate Fire-Absorbing Spell—a technique exclusive to Lord Duantian!

“Stop!” Seeing the fight going poorly for his son, Ding Hu thrust out his palm toward Mo Tianliao’s back.

The resulting gust of wind sent immense spiritual energy rushing toward Mo Tianliao. No matter how strong Mo Tianliao was, his cultivation was limited; there was no way he could hold up against a blow from a soul transformation cultivator two stages higher than him.

Mo Tianliao retracted his hand and turned Taishi into a shield, deploying all his spiritual energy to block the blow.

Wham! A thunderous crash rang out as Mo Tianliao was sent flying several feet back.

“Gah! Yow!” Taishi yelled in Mo Tianliao’s mind. The tremendous force of the impact deformed the shield, but it quickly reverted back to its original form. Before either man or artifact could recover, though, they were struck again. An enormous blast of force erupted, reducing vegetation and buildings within several miles to ashes. The onlookers who’d reacted quickly and erected defensive barriers escaped unscathed, while the slower ones coughed up blood.

The dust settled to reveal a figure in white standing before Mo Tianliao, shielding him, his slender, fair hand meeting Ding Hu’s palm.

Mo Tianliao was too close, and he’d been injured by the shockwave. A trail of blood trickled down from the corner of his mouth. He wiped it away with the back of his hand. “Shizun!”

Qingtong withdrew his palm at the same time as Ding Hu did. As he did so, he threw a backhanded slap at Ding Hu. At an event like this, weren’t they supposed to call a truce, exchange some pleasantries, and sit down to talk it over? Ding Hu hadn’t expected to be physically slapped. Caught off guard, he took the slap right in the face. Blood trickled from his mouth as well, although it wasn’t from an internal injury, but a split lip.

“Who are you to bully my disciple?” Qingtong said glacially.

It was the first time Ding Hu had ever been slapped. And Qingtong was several centuries his junior! For a moment, he was completely stunned.

“Father!” Ding Ziyu crawled out from the pile of earth. “Mo Tianliao is—argh!” He didn’t even get to finish his sentence before Qingtong slapped him so hard he went crashing to the ground.

Ding Hu snapped back to his senses at once when he saw Qingtong hit his son. “Qingtong, don’t push it!” he snarled, furious.

“You hurt my disciple; I hit your son—it’s a fair trade!” Qingtong crossed his arm and took Ding Hu’s incoming punch. The two immediately started trading blows.

It was unwise to remain nearby when soul transformation cultivators fought. The core formation cultivators and Liuyun Sect disciples and

attendants all fled to inform their sects' elders, leaving the mountaintop empty save for destroyed rocks and vegetation flying everywhere.

Sharp spikes formed out of ice crystals surrounded Ding Hu, while a phantom palm transformed into icicles in midair, shattering earthen walls several feet high. The pure ice-element spiritual power froze even the flames Ding Hu fired at the ice shards. Flames climbed up the ice dragon, which in turn devoured the flames, countering each other back and forth over and over. Countless ice spikes and earth spikes smashed against each other.

An artificer's divine soul was typically stronger than other cultivators'. Qingtong's divine soul was incomplete, and while he wouldn't be worried about a fight based purely on spiritual power, Ding Hu obviously wasn't going to fight with techniques alone. As an artificer, he hadn't spent as much effort on training combat stances. His advantage was in his divine soul, so he'd use his divine soul to fight.

Attacked by a powerful divine soul, Qingtong had to counter with his own divine soul, and the impact sent his divine soul reeling and his head throbbing with a dull ache. Qingtong frowned slightly. Ding Hu instantly noticed Qingtong's weakness and went after it directly. His transparent divine soul left his body, almost becoming corporeal as it lunged at Qingtong's.

Mo Tianliao instantly sensed something wrong. He turned Taishi into armor to protect his head and risked injury to rush over to Qingtong, wrapping an arm around his master's waist. "Shizun, I'll help you!"

His powerful divine soul met Ding Hu's head-on, intercepting it mentally before launching into a flurry of blows at him.

Ding Hu's eyes bulged. He let out a howl.

Mo Tianliao and Qingtong were standing so close that Ding Hu couldn't tell whose divine soul it was, and he assumed Qingtong had just been feigning weakness as a ruse to lure him into a trap. He immediately withdrew his divine soul and retreated.

"Father!" Ding Ziyu struggled over to Ding Hu, seeking his father's protection. He threw out a handful of magical artifacts that exploded in midair to provide them with some cover.

Qingtong waved away the obstruction and thrust out his palm at Ding Ziyu. Terrified, Ding Ziyu raised his hand to block the blow—one intended to kill. Blinding light flared out of the blue bracer on his wrist, reflecting an attack thick with spiritual power and killing intent back to Qingtong. The force of the rebound was so tremendous that Qingtong coughed up blood.

“Qingtong!” Mo Tianliao, who had been focused on dealing with Ding Hu’s divine soul, whipped around and leaped to catch the white figure that fell like a butterfly with broken wings. The bracer on Ding Ziyu’s wrist and the bracelet on Qingtong’s hand were a pair. Back when the kitten had still been young and ignorant, he had occasionally unintentionally attacked Mo Tianliao. Mo Tianliao couldn’t bear to use beast-taming devices on him, so he’d added a function to his bracer—any attack with the intent to kill would rebound to the cat. The cat may have been playful, but he had never truly intended to harm him, so it had never been activated. Qingtong himself had been completely unaware of it, but today…

With an enraged howl, Mo Tianliao hurled out Taishi, turned him into a scimitar, and slashed down to sever Ding Ziyu’s hand.

MINI EXTRA

Shizun: This is my new soul companion, the Blockhead Dog.

Woodworker: My darling, how can you say that about me?!

Taishi: Master, you said it yourself: *Just pretend you got bitten by a dog!*

Shizun: *pushes away* Forget it if you don’t want to become my companion.

Woodworker: …Woof!

Chapter 74:
Dual Cultivation

BLOOD SPRAYED HIGH into the air. Taishi instinctively transformed into a curved hook, snagging the severed arm as it fell, and flew back to its master's side. Mo Tianliao held Qingtong in one arm while grasping the severed hand with the bracer, his eyes glazing over with bloodlust.

Clutching his severed wrist, Ding Ziyu screamed in agony.

"Brat! Give me that hand!" Ding Hu lunged and made a grab for it.

Unlike spirit beasts, humans couldn't regenerate lost limbs. They'd need his severed hand and a miraculous elixir that could regrow flesh and bone if they wanted to reattach it.

Mo Tianliao sneered. Flames rose in his palm.

Ding Ziyu was a nascent soul cultivator, so every part of his body was fortified with spiritual power. Ordinary flames, even those generated using fire-element spiritual energy, couldn't burn his flesh very quickly. But by the time Ding Hu reached Mo Tianliao, the hand had already been reduced to ashes.

Ding Hu's eyes bulged at the sight of the glowing green flames; as an artificer, he recognized it at a glance. "Woodfire!"

Mo Tianliao locked eyes with Ding Hu and unleashed his enraged divine soul at him like a ferocious beast springing from its cage. Caught off guard, Ding Hu was assaulted head-on. He immediately used his own divine soul to ward off the attack, but he was overwhelmed by excruciating pain, as if his entire divine soul was being roasted over intense flames.

Mo Tianliao's eyes blazed red. The woodfire ran amok through his meridians, even reaching his divine soul. He was in exactly the same pain, but no pain could compare to the anguish in his heart. He didn't care about exposing his identity or about their sect's interests anymore. His Pawpaw had been grievously injured, all because he couldn't keep his own stupid hands to himself!

Unforgivable! All of them deserved to die!

Slipping the bloodstained bracer onto his left arm, he took out a top-grade spiritual stone and crushed it in his right hand. Absorbing the spiritual energy, he channeled it into Taishi, transforming him into a massive nine-ringed broadsword. Then, he charged at Ding Ziyu.

Boom!

"A divine artifact…" Ding Ziyu stared in terror at the tortoiseshell broadsword lunging toward him. As they'd fought earlier, he'd been astounded by the weapon's power to change shape at will. Now that it had absorbed enough spiritual energy, though, its intimidating presence alone was enough to render him immobile.

A Duantian divine artifact—capable of destroying the world!

He should have realized earlier. He'd spent a hundred years researching alongside his father, so how could he have forgotten that divine artifacts were the color of tortoiseshell?!

Formless and stateless. Ever-changing, yet an integrated whole.

So, the divine artifact actually isn't a butcher knife.… That was Ding Ziyu's final thought before he was hacked to mincemeat in a flurry of blade shadows.

"How dare you?!" Ding Hu's eyes bulged with rage as he thrust out a palm at Mo Tianliao's back.

Qingtong, slumped against Mo Tianliao's shoulder, opened his eyes and raised his hand to block the palm directly, sending Ding Hu flying. A deafening rumble rang out as the immense force razed the mountain to the ground.

The Liuyun Sect leader arrived just in time to catch Ding Hu. Ding Hu opened his mouth, only to cough up blood. He didn't manage to get a single word out before his eyes rolled back, and he passed out.

Liumang-zhenren saw a black streak of light fleeing the scene and moved to intercept it, but a rock-hard tortoise shell brimming with spiritual power struck him heavily in the head, and he almost fell out of the air.

"Xuanji, what do you mean by this?!" A huge lump immediately swelled up on the back of Liumang-zhenren's head.

Xuanji put away his shell and said nothing. A Woyun Sect disciple had reported earlier that someone wanted to kill Mo Tianliao. He'd have come to investigate had the Liuyun Sect leader not stopped him. Who knew just how long this man would have delayed him if not for the explosion?

"Shizun's soul companion has always been mischievous. Please do not take offense," Huaqing said, without much sincerity.

"Liumang-zhenren, you people grabbed my shidi and forced him to compete against a nascent soul cultivator, and you even had a soul transformation elder there to make sure he couldn't leave. Where is he now?" Zimo demanded coldly.

"Qingtong-zhenren was obviously the one who wounded our Elder Ding!" retorted a Liuyun Sect disciple. "How dare you play the victim!"

Elder Yunyuan of Qingyun Sect was about to speak up when Yunsong pulled her back and motioned for her to stay out of it.

Just then, the Liuyun Sect disciples in charge of watching over the spirit beasts ran over to make a report, all covered in dust. "Trouble, Sect Leader! The two foxes are gone!"

This place was near the mountaintop where the spirit beasts were kept, and the shockwave from the massive explosion just now had caused the buildings there to collapse. By the time they cleared away the debris, the two snow foxes who were supposed to be mating were gone.

As Liuyun Sect plunged into chaos, the black streak of light escaped out of the mountain-protecting grand array.

"Hang in there, my darling!" Mo Tianliao held on tight to the man coughing up blood in his arms and drove his sword as fast as it could go.

Towering mountains with peaks perpetually capped in snow reached toward the clouds, stretching for miles and miles around. When he reached these mountains, Mo Tianliao stopped and took out the crystal palace he'd just refined yesterday from Qingtong's inventory bracelet.

He tossed it out, and the crystal palace instantly expanded in midair and landed on the ground with a thunderous crash. Despite its size, it was rather inconspicuous among the vast expanses of snow, and being transparent, it was impossible to spot from the clouds.

Mo Tianliao carried Qingtong straight to the second-floor bedroom. He took out dozens of high-grade spiritual stones and slotted them into the grooves in the wall, and the celestial artifact crystal palace immediately activated all its defensive arrays.

Mo Tianliao gently set the man in his arms on the bed, but even this gentle movement caused Qingtong unbearable pain, and he coughed up more blood, staining more than half of his snowy robes red. His handsome, flawless face was so pale it was almost transparent.

“Qingtong…” Mo Tianliao didn’t dare to touch him. He frantically dumped out all of the elixirs in their inventory bracelets.

Among those vials and bottles, he found one heaven-grade pill for stopping blood loss—the very thing that had sustained him back when he’d fled to Annihilation Valley. It felt like every time he used this thing, nothing good followed.

Mo Tianliao tipped out a bright red pill and tried to feed it to Qingtong, but Qingtong kept his teeth clenched shut.

“Damn it!” Mo Tianliao angrily flung away the jade bottle. Putting the pill into his own mouth, he chewed it, then pinched Qingtong’s chin to hold it in place and fed it to him mouth-to-mouth. It took two more pills after that one, but the bleeding finally slowed to a stop.

Taishi turned into a big mouth and circled around the bed. “He’s too heavily injured. No medicine will work. You have to feed him your blood.”

By now, Mo Tianliao had already checked on Qingtong’s injuries with his divine sense. His organs and meridians had all sustained considerable damage, although his dantian had been hit the hardest. The backlash from that palm strike had rebounded directly into his dantian, and because it had originated from the same source, there had been no way to stop it. Once brimming with an abundance of spiritual energy, his core was now slowly beginning to dissipate.

“My blood…” Facing such dire injuries, Mo Tianliao suddenly calmed down and looked down at his palm. The regenerative life force of the Undying Tree could restore damaged plants. Perhaps it could even mend damaged energy cores.

He didn’t know whether it would work or not, but Mo Tianliao extended his wrist and summoned Taishi to make an incision. He sucked up some blood and leaned down to feed it to Qingtong. As he did so, he reached down and gently massaged his throat to help him swallow while he activated his soothing wood-element spiritual energy to assimilate it into the blood.

The regenerative power of the undying divine tree flowed rapidly through Qingtong’s body, forcibly repairing several life-threatening injuries. Qingtong’s eyes snapped open and he groaned, biting his lower lip, his body arching from the agonizing pain caused by the forcibly imposed restoration.

“My darling!” Mo Tianliao pulled him into his arms, pinched his mouth open, and shoved his arm between his lips. Delirious with pain, Qingtong bit down on it.

Mo Tianliao grunted as sharp teeth pierced deeply into his forearm. Blood gushed into Qingtong’s mouth, even as his black hair gradually turned white.

After a while, the force of his bite relaxed. Mo Tianliao tentatively withdrew his arm and stroked the side of Qingtong’s icy face. “My darling…”

Qingtong’s eyes slowly opened, the glass-colored orbs dull and lightless. The specks of light within began to disperse.

“Oh no! His divine soul!” Mo Tianliao was shocked; those scattering specks of light were Qingtong’s divine soul. His injuries were too grave, and the damage to his divine soul had reached a critical point where Qingtong could no longer control his divine soul. If this continued…

“Feed him the Oblivion Herb now!” Taishi cried, circling anxiously. The dissipation of his divine soul meant that Qingtong’s fragile soul could no longer take any further stress. It was like a damaged inventory slot, unable to take in any more inventory; they had to clear it out—in this case, by having him consume the Oblivion Herb—before it would function again.

The Oblivion Herb… Mo Tianliao turned to look at the bottles and vials scattered across the ground. The jade box containing the Oblivion

Herb stood out like a sore thumb among all the little jade bottles. If Qingtong took the Oblivion Herb, he might forget Mo Tianliao.

If his cat forgot him, when those pretty eyes of his opened again, they would be distant. Qingtong would ask him in an indifferent voice, “Who are you?” The snow-white cat would no longer stay by his side. He would keep his distance and glare warily at him, just like when Mo Tianliao had first brought him home as a kitten. He’d scratch and bite him without warning and even use his spirit soul to attack him.

Just the thought of it tore his heart apart.

No! Absolutely not!

His eyes stopped on a white jade bottle and lit up. Forming a grasping hand, he instantly summoned the bottle to his palm. The heaven-grade Nectar of Intimacy!

This was the offering that Shidi had brought back from Bahuang City to be burned for Duantian. It was a marvelous item that could prevent the backflow of cultivation and aid in dual cultivation between two males. If he used this, he wouldn’t have to worry about the disparity in their levels harming Qingtong’s cultivation.

Mo Tianliao smacked his head. How could he have forgotten this? “Taishi, if we dual cultivate now—”

“Great idea!” Taishi excitedly turned into a dildo before Mo Tianliao could even finish speaking. “Dual cultivation can restore part of his divine soul, so he won’t need to take the Oblivion Herb!”

Mo Tianliao smacked Taishi into the wall. Then he sat down beside Qingtong and leaned down to kiss him. His sweetheart had to be in agony with his divine soul in turmoil like this. Once he’d stabilized Qingtong’s divine soul with a long kiss, he stood up, scratched his head, and paced around for a bit before he headed for the bathroom.

Qingtong slowly opened his eyes. Every part of him ached, but the pain had become bearable. Mo Tianliao gently wiped the blood from Qingtong’s cheeks and neck with a warm, damp cloth, his fingers trembling as he reached for his bloodstained attire. It was transformed from Qingtong’s fur. Usually, all it took was a thought from Qingtong for it to

become clean. Just as he was about to strip it off, the clothing suddenly became white and pristine.

Mo Tianliao looked up and met a pair of clear, glass-colored eyes.

He tossed the cloth away. Bracing himself on the bed with one hand, Mo Tianliao leaned over and looked at the pale-faced Qingtong. He held one of his slightly cold hands and said with deliberation and utmost gravity, “My darling, listen to me. You’re severely wounded, and your divine soul is dissipating.”

Qingtong’s clear eyes widened slightly, looking dazed as he listened to Mo Tianliao explain the dual cultivation technique of the great spirits in ancient times.

“The only way now is to dual cultivate with me,” Mo Tianliao said, a little conscience-stricken; even his palms were sweating. “If you aren’t willing—”

Qingtong looked quietly at him. If he refused, he’d have to take the Oblivion Herb, wouldn’t he? They had already found most of nature’s treasures to mend the divine soul. All that was left was the Resurrection Tree. But if he took the Oblivion Herb, would he still remember Mo Tianliao?

He thought Mo Tianliao would say *If you aren’t willing, I’ll find the Resurrection Tree even if I have to search to the end of the world*, but instead, without any shame whatsoever, he said, “—just pretend you got bitten by a dog. You can beat me up later when you regain your strength!”

Without further delay, he began untying Qingtong’s sash.

Chapter 75:
Kiss And Make Up

"YOU…" QINGTONG WAS so exasperated that he tried to slap him, but his blow landed feebly, and his hand fell limply. He couldn't muster any strength at all.

Given the disparity in their cultivation, it would have usually been hard for Mo Tianliao to get his way, but things were different now. His cold, powerful master lay weak and powerless on the bed, completely at his mercy.

When he looked down at Qingtong like this, Mo Tianliao couldn't hold back anymore. Even if he were to wake up tomorrow and find himself reduced to a pile of wood shavings, he'd accept it.

He carefully removed the outer garment made of merfolk silk, then, with practiced ease, stripped away the long robe that was transfigured from Qingtong's fur. The long robe disappeared as soon as it was removed, revealing the thin inner garment.

The inner garment, which was actually his underfur, was extremely soft and smooth. Mo Tianliao couldn't stop himself from running his hand over it. Sliding his hand down from shoulder to forearm, he grasped the wrist wearing the inventory bracelet and pinned it to the pillow as he leaned in for a kiss.

Qingtong turned his head away, dodging his kiss so that it landed on his neck instead. "So, it's a beast-taming bracelet after all," he scoffed. "And here I thought it was a treasure—I even wore it all these years."

Mo Tianliao froze. Slowly, he propped himself up, his eyes full of pain.

Qingtong didn't look at him. Instead, he turned his head and looked quietly out of the window. The wall was transparent, offering a clear view of the vast expanse of white outside, where heavy snow danced through the sky.

When he’d first forged this bracelet, it did have a rebound effect, because the kitten wouldn’t stop scratching Duantian, and Mo Tianliao loved his cat like his life and couldn’t bear to hit him. So, when he’d been forging this pair of inventory bracelets, he’d suddenly come up with the idea to add this function.

Because of the array between the two bracelets, any time the cat scratched Mo Tianliao it would rebound back to him, teaching him how to control his strength and preventing His Feline Lordship from scratching his handsome face to shreds. But one time, a provoked Pawpaw had bitten him hard, only for his own paw to end up bleeding.

Thinking Mo Tianliao had hit him, the kitten had cowered in the corner, trembling. For a long time after that, he’d refused to let Mo Tianliao touch him. Mo Tianliao’s heart had ached. He’d removed the array, thinking that it didn’t matter if the cat scratched or bit him. It wasn’t like a tiny cat had that much strength, anyway. But the foundation of that array was an array that would reflect any killing intent, just like Woyun Sect’s mountain-protecting stone.

Many other arrays could be further developed and stacked on top of this foundational array, and Qingtong’s bracelet also had the function to store living creatures—this was linked to the reflection array, making it difficult to dismantle entirely without breaking that function. Besides, the cat hadn’t signed a blood pact with him, and a spirit soul was more powerful than the divine soul of a human cultivator. In order to be able to safely press his forehead against his cat, Mo Tianliao had selfishly neglected to dismantle it fully.

Mo Tianliao looked down at the man lying beneath him, who was looking lost, and his heart ached until he could barely breathe. He slipped the bracelet off of Qingtong’s wrist and removed the bracer from his own left arm. “Let’s swap. I’ll add the array back later. From now on, I’m the one who can’t hurt you. If I ever raise a hand against you, it’ll rebound back to me.”

Qingtong stared blankly at the bracer on his wrist. “Will dual cultivation…rebound too?”

Mo Tianliao paused for a moment, then chuckled as he tugged open the last inner garment. “No, it won’t.”

The inner garment fell open, sliding down to Qingtong's elbows before Mo Tianliao pressed down on it, incidentally obstructing the hand trying to push him away. Tender kisses soothed Qingtong's splitting headache, and the hand that was about to hit Mo Tianliao gradually went limp and clutched at the pillow instead.

Qingtong's divine soul was continuing to dissipate; Mo Tianliao couldn't afford to waste time. He shook his head and forced himself to remain clearheaded despite his excitement.

The crystal-clear liquid in the white jade bottle gave off a barely perceptible fragrance. To prevent himself from getting too carried away and delaying the healing, Mo Tianliao strained to tear his eyes away from Qingtong's flawless body and leaned in to kiss his lips.

"It'll hurt a little. Bear with it, my darling." Mo Tianliao hugged him and sank down.

The instant he entered, Qingtong bit down on his shoulder, and the slight pain nearly wrested away his self-control.

Qingtong grunted, a thin layer of sweat appearing on his face, which was growing even paler in his discomfort.

"The way of Heaven takes from what is in excess to make whole what is in dearth." Mo Tianliao took a deep breath and kissed away the sweat as he recited the dual cultivation incantation of the ancient great spirits. "The world is the vessel; the spirit soul is the medium. There exists in all the negative yin and the positive yang, and both energies shall blend as one to achieve harmony…"

As he recited, their divine souls began to resonate.

Although Mo Tianliao's cultivation was only at the core formation stage, his divine soul was at the soul transformation stage and could leave his body, which was the key to completing the ancient great spirits' dual cultivation technique. Pressing their foreheads together, Mo Tianliao slowly sent his soul into Qingtong's psyche. Qingtong's damaged divine soul was curled within, an ethereal beauty identical to Qingtong himself, albeit a tad fainter. In contrast, Mo Tianliao's soul was clear and complete, streaked through here and there with a pearlescent glow. That was Qingtong's spirit soul that had fused with his.

Qingtong’s psyche initially resisted the foreign intrusion, but once the divine soul recognized Mo Tianliao, it gradually lowered its barriers. Mo Tianliao’s divine soul lunged over with joy, immediately merging as one with it. The comforting sensation emanating deep from his soul spread through Qingtong’s body, and he forgot his pain at once. A soft moan of pleasure escaped him.

Soul fusion was unique to the ancient dual cultivation technique of the great spirits. Mo Tianliao had to recite the incantation, but Qingtong didn’t; his bloodline was already that of an ancient great spirit, and these instincts were all already deeply ingrained in his blood and bones. His divine soul soon took the dominant position, turning into countless orbs of light that tightly enveloped Mo Tianliao’s divine soul.

The art of dual cultivation was intended to harmonize the forces of yin and yang and to balance what was in excess and what was in deficit. The two divine souls were like two sponges with different absorption rates: The one with less water greedily absorbed it from the one saturated with it. The spirit soul that had merged into Mo Tianliao's divine soul gradually floated free and returned to where it had originated.

After a round of fusion, Qingtong slowly opened his eyes. Specks of light no longer dissipated from those eyes like light-colored glass, and his headache was gone. The restoration of the soul was a lengthy process that couldn't be completed in a single session, but just once was enough to sustain him for a while.

"Mm, I feel much better." Qingtong slowly drifted back to reality from his comfortable haze. As his physical senses gradually returned, he felt the foreign object in his body. Frowning slightly, he moved to push Mo Tianliao away.

"Baby, that won't do." Mo Tianliao chuckled as he caught Qingtong's hand and pinned it back above his head. "The *real* dual cultivation is about to begin." The immediate crisis had been averted, so now it was time to address other needs.

He snapped his fingers, and the sheer silk at the bed corners slowly fell. The crystal-clear walls gradually turned white, merging into one with the snow.

The regenerative power of the Undying Tree flowed into Qingtong through their dual cultivation and continued to mend his injured organs and meridians. As Mo Tianliao moved, he released his divine soul again. The resonating frequency of their souls enhanced the restorative effect even more.

By the time the moon hung high in the sky, Mo Tianliao, contented and covered in claw marks, hugged the sleeping Qingtong in his arms. The walls became transparent again, and as he looked up at the starry sky, he felt like he possessed the whole world.

The next morning, sunlight streamed through the transparent walls and thin sheer silks, falling across Qingtong's face. The handsome face that had been lifeless yesterday had regained its fair, rosy hue. His eyelashes

fluttered, as if the blinding light had disrupted his sweet dreams, and his brows creased into a discontented frown as he nestled closer to the warmth.

Mo Tianliao looked at the man burying his face in his chest and couldn't stop a smile from spreading across his face. He pulled him closer and blocked out the dazzling sunlight with his arm. Very gently, he kissed the top of Qingtong's snowy-white head. Qingtong's furry ears twitched, brushing against Mo Tianliao's chin.

When had they popped out? Mo Tianliao blinked and took the tip of one ear between his lips. Grumbling, Qingtong curled inward, pressing the top of his head against Mo Tianliao's chest to keep his ears out of reach.

Silly cat… Mo Tianliao's heart melted at the sight of Qingtong acting like such a cute little cat in his human form. Knowing he was exhausted, though, he stopped teasing him and held him close, running his hands over his body. The heaven-grade Nectar of Intimacy was really good stuff; Qingtong didn't seem to be hurt at all. The silky-smooth tactile sensation was so intoxicating that what had started out as checking for injuries gradually took on a suggestive turn.

Smack! The back of his hand received a sharp slap. Mo Tianliao looked down and met a pair of cold, glass-colored eyes. Sheepishly, he retracted his hand.

"Does it still hurt?"

Qingtong closed his eyes and looked within himself. Most of his internal injuries had healed, and the constant throbbing in his head had disappeared. But when he looked up at Mo Tianliao, who was looking back at him with a big, punchable grin on his face, he felt the urge to follow through.

"Insolent disciple!" Qingtong raised his hand to hit him.

Mo Tianliao quickly pulled the blanket over his head. "Mercy, Shizun! I'm grievously injured—I can't take another hit!"

"You're hurt?" Qingtong propped himself up, frowning as he looked down at the lump under the blanket. He must have sustained injuries while fighting with the Dings yesterday. Before that, he had been wounded by the array when they were stealing the Jadefruit, and with the competition right after, he hadn't had time to heal his wounds. And then this had happened…

Mo Tianliao poked his head out of the blanket and pulled it away, exposing the claw marks on his back.

Qingtong silently raised his hand and flashed his claws.

A tragic cry of pain startled the tortoiseshell candlestick on the table so much that he fell onto the floor. He flew over, transforming into a big mouth. “Wow, Master, your back is like a work of art. You could play tic-tac-toe back there.”

Before there had just been horizontal streaks resembling field ridges, but now vertical marks had been added in a fascinating tapestry of crisscrossing lines. Mo Tianliao gritted his teeth. “So, you’re an art connoisseur now?”

“Of course!” Taishi smugly turned into a brush.

Qingtong pinched his lips and got out of bed. His legs immediately collapsed. Mo Tianliao swiftly rose to catch him, but Qingtong pushed him away.

Mo Tianliao froze, overcome by panic as he watched Qingtong conjure up his clothes and get dressed. He’d indeed taken advantage of the cat’s vulnerability yesterday, forcing him to dual cultivate while he was injured and too powerless to resist. Though it had been a wonderful experience, he knew that, given His Feline Lordship’s nature, he wouldn’t just let it go.

“Baby…” Mo Tianliao wrapped his arms around Qingtong’s slender waist, at a loss for what to say. He’d acted out of love, but Qingtong had only just said yes to him a few days ago; he wasn’t ready for this level of intimacy. Besides…

They sat at the edge of the bed as the bright sunlight streamed in, refracting a mosaic of blue light onto their faces. Qingtong looked down at the bracer on his wrist, which was two fingers wider than his own bracelet, with an extra pointed corner. His lips pressed tighter. He removed the bracer.

“Uh, you don’t like it?” Mo Tianliao’s heart clenched. He caught the bracer and ran his fingers over it. The man in his arms stood up and left his embrace. Mo Tianliao’s eyes reddened. Could Qingtong really not forgive

him? Was he going to lose him immediately after winning him over? No! It couldn't be!

"It's ugly." Qingtong slipped the bracelet off of Mo Tianliao's left wrist and secured it back onto his own. Besides, his bracelet could store living creatures, and Mo Tianliao's couldn't.

Mo Tianliao looked up in bewilderment. The red that had begun to rim his eyes vanished.

"I'm going to take a bath." Qingtong lifted his chin slightly and kicked Mo Tianliao's calf with his toe. His waist was sore and aching, and it was taking him a lot of effort just to stand. Looking at the bathroom a good thirty feet away, he didn't feel like walking anymore.

Mo Tianliao snapped back to reality and put the bracer back on his wrist. He scooped Qingtong into his arms. "Yes, Master!"

MINI EXTRA

A Divine Artifact is Erudite

Taishi: I know this. It's a piece of art.

Woodworker: Oh, and what kind of art is it?

Taishi: Tic-tac-toe.

Woodworker: Impressive. Here's a ball of woodfire as your reward.

Taishi: For the sake of truth, I fear no trial by fire! Yow! Ow, ow, ow!

Chapter 76:
After The Deed

THE BATHROOM HAD A GIANT bathing pool carved from crystal, inscribed with a water-channeling spell array that could draw in water from nearby springs. Mo Tianliao activated the array. The pool was soon filled with clear water that was actually melted snow from the peaks, still emanating wisps of chilly air.

He set Qingtong down on the couch by the pool and activated the crimson firecloud stone embedded in the side. In no time, the water heated up. The crystal palace was filled with spell arrays, and celestial artifacts typically ran on spiritual stones. This water-boiling spell was fueled by the high-grade spiritual stones that Mo Tianliao had embedded into the slots when he first entered.

Qingtong looked curiously around the room from where he lay on the couch.

Taishi flew over and transformed into a piece of foxtail grass swaying back and forth. “I did the math. This palace consumes three high-grade spiritual stones per day.”

The tortoiseshell foxtail grass, with bristles as hard as steel needles, didn’t look fun to play with at all. Qingtong flicked a finger and instantly froze him into a block of ice—and a grunt escaped his lips as a dull pain shot through his body. He clutched a hand to his chest and bowed over.

“Qingtong!” Mo Tianliao, who was turning to pick him up, was shocked at the sight. He crouched down and looked at him. “What’s wrong? Does it hurt?”

The pain passed, and Qingtong removed his hand and shook his head. His internal injuries hadn’t fully healed and his dantian had only just been repaired, so he was still quite fragile, and using his vital force had triggered the pain—it was only to be expected.

Mo Tianliao could see what had happened too. He kissed Qingtong’s forehead, his heart aching. “Don’t use your vital force again while your

injuries are still healing.” Once a cultivator reached the soul transformation stage, their spiritual power would be converted to vital force through the dantian. Without it, Qingtong would have to live like a mortal for now, unable to fight or fly.

There was danger at every turn in the cultivation world. The incident at Liuyun Sect wasn’t going to end peacefully; if they left now, conflict would be inevitable. Mo Tianliao, who had initially planned to return to their sect as soon as possible, changed his mind—he’d stay on the snowy mountains for a few more days until his beloved cat recovered. The sect had Tianlang-zhenren to hold down the fort anyway.

***

“ACHOO!” OVER AT WOYUN SECT, Tianlang-zhenren sneezed explosively.

“Your nose is so sensitive, Father. Stay away from the flowers.” A young man in a black-and-white cultivator robe walked over and took away the chrysanthemums sitting in front of Tianlang.

“Hey, don’t. I was going to make tea with those.” Tianlang snatched the flowers back. These were Moonfall Chrysanthemums, said to contain the essence of moonlight; one of the smaller sects had sent them as tribute.

“You need to dry them first, Father.” Langzi expressionlessly took the flowers away again and went off to dry them.

The corners of Tianlang’s mouth twitched. His son was getting so much less adorable by the day. How had his fluffy little puppy turned out like this? He’d have to ask his master what he’d been teaching the boy all these years.

***

THE WATER WAS COMFORTABLY HOT, just the right temperature to relieve the fatigue in Qingtong's body.

He let out a soft sigh and leaned against Mo Tianliao. Mo Tianliao smiled and scooped up some water to bathe his cat.

Red marks covered Qingtong's fair skin, extending from his neck to certain unmentionable areas. The sight made Mo Tianliao's heart race. He couldn't help it—his scrubbing hand ended up exerting more force over a sensitive spot. Qingtong let out a soft moan, his slender legs twitching and sending up splashes of water.

The sweet sound sent a tingle through Mo Tianliao's heart. His mouth went dry. He lowered his head and licked at one of the red marks on Qingtong's neck.

Qingtong pushed at him. "I want to bathe!"

"That's what we're doing right now, isn't it?" Mo Tianliao grinned, and continued to clean him with care.

"It hurts!" Qingtong frowned and pushed him away, but as he'd been sitting on Mo Tianliao's lap, he ended up pushing himself into the water, drenching his furry ears so they drooped pitifully against his head.

Mo Tianliao quickly scooped him into his arms and helped him shake the water out of his ears. "Did any water get in there?"

Qingtong was about to say no, but then he froze and reached up to touch his head. When he discovered the cat ears there, his face darkened. He pressed his lips together and hid his ears away.

"Why put them away? There's no one else here." Mo Tianliao looked at him expectantly.

Qingtong ignored him and retreated to the edge of the pool to wash himself.

Mo Tianliao swam over and pulled his precious cat into his arms. "Did I hurt you just now?" He frowned. He'd intended to clean out what he'd left inside Qingtong's body, but he'd only managed to insert up to his first knuckle when Qingtong cried out in pain. Logically speaking, the stuff inside should have at least lubricated the way a little…

Ignoring the cat's claws, Mo Tianliao reached over to cop a feel. Nothing. He kneaded for a moment, then slowly inserted a finger using the water to help. It was the same inside. He blinked. "Where did it go?"

Qingtong swiped at him with his claws. The sap of the Undying Tree contained an extremely potent regenerative life force. To other living beings, it was a rare treasure—Qingtong's body was no exception, and so of course it had absorbed every last drop. There was no way his inner injuries would have healed this fast without it.

Realization hit Mo Tianliao when he saw his cat's indignant and embarrassed expression. He wisely kept his mouth shut and drew his temperamental master into his arms to soothe him. This meant that if they dual cultivated just a few more times, it would completely heal his master's internal injuries. He couldn't help but break into a slightly lascivious smile.

He'd tasted his master for the first time last night, and that taste was so intoxicating he couldn't get enough of it. If it wasn't for Qingtong's injuries, he could have probably kept going for half a month. And now it seemed…

Sensing something off with Mo Tianliao's expression, Qingtong held up a hand to prevent his face from approaching any further, then splashed him with water.

They played around in the water until Qingtong had had enough. Mo Tianliao carried him out of the bath and dried him off, then wrapped him up with a large towel and carried him back to the bed, where he carefully dried his hair. Qingtong lay across his lap, purring contentedly.

Mo Tianliao gently stroked Qingtong's smooth, snowy hair. "There should be rabbits or long-furred deer on this mountain. Do you want something to eat? I'll go take a look in a bit." Qingtong was tired and didn't want to dual cultivate with him, so he had to hold back his desire and find something else to occupy himself.

Qingtong hummed in response and slowly closed his eyes. Mo Tianliao tucked him in, kissed his forehead, and summoned Taishi to go hunting.

As a celestial artifact, the crystal palace was extremely safe once it had been activated; not even a soul transformation cultivator would be able

to breach its walls. After Mo Tianliao had left, Qingtong opened his eyes. Through the transparent walls, he gazed blankly at the black figure almost lost against the snowy landscape, and slowly buried half of his face into the blanket.

MINI EXTRA

Shizun: Why has our relationship changed so suddenly? I’m not used to this.

Woodworker: What was our relationship before?

Shizun: A cat and his scratching post.

Woodworker: How about now? *flashes his back artwork*

Shizun: A shizun and his scratching post.

Woodworker: See, no change.

Shizun: *speechless*

Chapter 77:
Hunting

OUTSIDE, SNOW WAS STILL FALLING. The sky was a drab gray, and it seemed like the snow would only get heavier. Although it was already close to noon, it was still extremely cold. Mo Tianliao rubbed his hands together, pulled out a fire-attribute cloak from his bracer, and draped it over himself. This cloak repelled snow and rain, was wind-resistant, and provided warmth.

Ding Ziyu hadn't been able to access this bracer before; it had a soul imprint on it, and Mo Tianliao's divine soul hadn't been destroyed. Out of his own selfish desire to prevent anyone else from getting their hands on the objects within, though, he'd never even asked his father for help, and everything in the bracer had been left untouched.

Three centuries ago, when Mo Tianliao had been fleeing for his life, he'd used up just about every spiritual treasure and magical artifact that could defeat his enemies. All that was left apart from large quantities of spiritual stones was stuff that Mo Tianliao had used in everyday life: cloaks and other garments, cooking utensils, dried fish snacks…

This bracer's functions were far more practical than that lightning tribulation-resistance inventory bracelet. Mo Tianliao transferred everything from the bracelet to his bracer, planning to sell the bracelet at the marketplace later. Taishi imitated the bracer's appearance perfectly—except for his color, which was still the same old ugly tortoiseshell color. In that regard he couldn't compare to the bracer on Mo Tianliao's left arm, which would occasionally glow blue.

Unable to stay still for long, Taishi transformed into a big mouth and flew above Mo Tianliao's head. "Master, why didn't you inlay me with a few gemstones?"

Mo Tianliao leaped onto a huge boulder and looked out into the distance. "If you can promise me you won't eat the gemstones, I'll inlay them for you."

The big mouth opened and closed. There was nothing he could say to refute that.

The snowy mountain range stretched endlessly into the distance, peak after peak. The place where the crystal palace had landed had seemed to be a valley between two summits, but rather than a valley, it was actually a vast expanse of snowfield. Ahead was a mountain forest of cold-resistant pines and cypresses laden with frost and snow. Further down the snow gradually disappeared, giving way to entirely new scenery at the foot of the mountain.

This was likely the famous Mount Hansong, which produced a kind of Snowicicle Stone that was translucent white with rime-like patterns inside. Typically used to make ice-attribute magical artifacts, it wasn't considered a high-grade material, but it was pretty and therefore popular among female cultivators, who would often carve it into hairpins and bracelets. In Mo Tianliao's demon palace, he had a whole pavilion sculpted out of Snowicicle; it made for a refreshing retreat on summer days. Pawpaw had loved that place a lot.

He looked back at the crystal palace behind him. With his cultivator's vision, he was able to see into its interior, where Qingtong lay obediently in bed. His lips curled into a smile. This feeling of the wife sleeping lazily at home while the husband went out to hunt and provide for the family was… inexplicably satisfying.

The snow atop this mountain never melted, and it was extremely cold and windy. Ordinary cultivators who came here without expensive warming artifacts would soon be sapped of their spiritual energy, and ordinary people wouldn't be able to survive at all. Only a few ordinary beasts could thrive here, such as the long-furred deer.

Mo Tianliao summoned back Taishi, who had been changed into an arrow, and picked up the dead deer to weigh it in his hand. It was a plump, healthy buck, just right for two people. He threw the entire carcass into his bracer and turned to search for some mushrooms and spiritual herbs for seasoning. These couldn't be found in the snowy forest, so he walked through a vast stretch of forest until he emerged. Midway down the mountain, he began to hear shouting.

"Quick! Don't let them run away!"

“Go east! Cast the net, quick!”

“Where’s the Spirit-Disciplining Horn?”

The chaotic voices moved east. Mo Tianliao released his divine sense. There were three core formation cultivators and five foundation establishment cultivators in the forest, presumably spirit beast hunters hot on the heels of spirit beasts.

He wasn’t intending on interfering, but when he turned to leave, he heard one of the hunters saying, “Say, that fox has a collar around its neck. Maybe it has an owner?”

“Who cares? Just catch it first.”

A fox with a collar—why did that sound familiar?

Mo Tianliao decisively leaped onto a branch and approached the group.

Two white foxes were trapped in a small spell array. They seemed to be injured, with specks of blood littering their white fur. The one wearing a collar stood in front of the other fox, shielding her and glowering at the men.

“Take this,” Shuangren said to his sister in beast language, pushing the artifact that could defend against the Spirit-Disciplining Horn to her. “I’ll lure them away and you run up the mountain. Remember where to find our tribe?”

They’d spent several days in that house at Liuyun Sect, and his sister had been so terrified that she hadn’t been able to sleep without him hugging her constantly. That had given the guards the impression that the two foxes might actually succeed in breeding, so they’d fed them well. But they’d also kept a close watch on the foxes around the clock, so they’d never found the chance to escape.

Yesterday, however, that sudden explosion had shaken the mountain, and the ward around the house had collapsed. Shuangren had reacted immediately. Before the disciples could crawl out of the rubble, he’d changed into human form, picked up his sister, and flew off on his summoned sword. The inventory collar that his second senior had given him contained Liuyun Sect’s access token, so he tucked his sister inside his

robe and followed the crowd as they flew to the neighboring peak. The guards looking for the escaped foxes had never suspected he was hiding among the crowd.

Later, when Xuanji and the Liuyun sect leader had fought, everyone had been in a rush to move out of the way. As Shuangren wasn't on the list of names of the members of his sect who had attended, he wouldn't have been able to escape if they'd launched an investigation, and he would have ended up causing trouble for the sect, so he'd seized his chance and fled to the snowy mountains amid the chaos. His spiritual sword wasn't as light and nimble as Mo Tianliao's, and he'd exhausted his spiritual power by the time they reached the vicinity of the mountains. Worse yet, in a stroke of terrible luck, they'd run into a group of hunters.

"I'm not leaving!" The little fox clutched the fur on her brother's back. Before Shuangren could try to persuade her, the hunters made their move. The eight of them encircled the two foxes, hemming them in. Shuangren transformed into human form, tucked his sister into his robe, and held his sword defensively in front of him.

"Whoa!" The hunters were shocked—they'd never seen a spirit cultivator's human form before. "An evolved spirit cultivator!"

Shuangren struck before any of them could react, lunging at the weakest foundation establishment cultivator to the southeast. Despite the risk of injury from the spell array, Shuangren leaped at the man, his spiritual sword slashing down upon his head with an unstoppable force. Startled, the cultivator hastily raised his blade to block—but unfortunately for him, Mo Tianliao was the one who'd given Shuangren this sword, so it went without saying that this was no ordinary magical artifact. With Shuangren's core formation spiritual power behind it, it sliced clean through the blade and slew the hunter in one strike.

He mounted his sword and took off up the mountain, but a core formation hunter sprang into the air and struck down at his chest with his hand. Shuangren dodged that attack only for another core formation hunter to catch up and strike him in the back. He rolled across the ground, coughing blood, but managed to brace himself on one knee and support himself with his spiritual sword. He glared coldly at the hunters.

Shuangren’s new form had made the hunters even greedier than before. They’d heard that an evolved spirit cultivator had sold for an exorbitant price at the Six Harmonies Bazaar. If they caught this kid, they could sell him for enough spiritual stones to last them all the way to the nascent soul stage.

These hunters were all independent cultivators who hadn’t mastered any particularly advanced techniques. They were no match for disciples of similar cultivation from the major sects. The problem was that Shuangren had only just joined Woyun Sect and hadn’t learned much from Yanlie yet—and he was outnumbered seven to one. He didn’t stand a chance.

“Gentlemen,” Shuangren said as he stood up, “I know I can’t escape today, but if I self-destruct my spirit core, you can forget about walking away alive.”

As a group, the hunters involuntarily took a step away. They knew there was no way any of them could withstand the destructive power of a devastated spirit cultivator’s core.

“This little fox is my sister,” Shuangren told them. His face was full of resolve. “She’s young and you won’t be able to sell her for much. If you let her go, I’ll come with you.”

The hunters traded glances, eyeing the little fox head poking out of Shuangren’s collar. She was so tiny that she didn’t seem capable of transforming into human form. She would be worth even less than a tenth of an evolved spirit beast. After some deliberation, the leader agreed.

Shuangren set the little fox in his arms down and signaled with his eyes for her to run. If just he was captured, he could still find a way to escape. His second senior had left him a jade slip for communication, so if all else failed, he could still turn to his sect for help. No matter what, he couldn’t let his sister fall into the hands of these people.

The little fox looked at her brother, her eyes wet with tears, then turned and ran.

The moment the little fox broke through the circle of hunters, a core formation cultivator summoned the Spirit-Disciplining Horn and channeled spiritual energy into it. A shrill, piercing sound reverberated through the mountains.

The little fox cried out in pain, and the foundation establishment cultivator nearest to her grabbed her while two core formation cultivators lunged at Shuangren. With the little fox in their hands, they were sure the evolved fox would submit.

They had assumed the Spirit-Disciplining Horn would make Shuangren surrender without a fight, but all that happened was that he turned slightly gray. His attacks were still swift as ever, startling the two cultivators. The one who'd lunged the fastest found himself at the end of Shuangren's sword.

Meanwhile, Shuanghua transformed into human form and punched straight through the dantian of the foundation establishment cultivator who'd attempted to catch her.

"This one's an evolved spirit cultivator too!" Realizing the truth, the remaining core formation cultivator instantly lunged for Shuanghua.

Whoosh—a sharp whistling sound pierced through the air. The man instinctively dodged, just as an arrow grazed past his cheek.

As soon as the dark arrow stabbed into the ground, it vanished. Another arrow followed directly after. The core formation cultivator summoned his whip, a treasure artifact, and struck out to deflect the tortoiseshell arrow. "Who goes there—argh!" Before he could finish, the arrow swooped around and pierced through his chest. Blood sprayed into the air.

Collapsing to the ground, he quickly took out several medicinal pills. The two foundation establishment cultivators rushed over to protect him while he swallowed them. Of these three core formation cultivators, one was the leader of their hunting squad, while the other two hailed from renowned spirit-hunting clans. If any of them was to perish here, there would be hell to pay.

Countless wooden spikes rained down from above, forcing the hunters to scramble for cover. They looked up to see a man cloaked in black holding a tortoiseshell bow. His face was hidden under the hood of his cloak, but there was no mistaking the murderous aura radiating off him.

Standing beside Shuanghua, Mo Tianliao glanced at the beautiful girl lying weakly on the ground and looked away, making no move to help her

up. Had she been in her fox form, Mo Tianliao would absolutely have picked her up in his arms, given his soft spot for furry creatures—but as things were, he decided to let her be. Frostfoxes didn't fear the cold, anyway.

"Who are you?" A core formation cultivator broke away from the group fighting with Shuangren to deal with Mo Tianliao.

"A hunter." Mo Tianliao nonchalantly drew his bow. A tortoiseshell arrow instantly materialized.

Every trade had its own rules, and hunters often poached each other's prey. As long as you were strong enough, whatever you could grab was yours. That was why there were three core formation cultivators in this hunting squad. Ever since someone had caught an evolved spirit cultivator here, the hunters coming here had gotten stronger and stronger. A team needed at least two core formation cultivators before they'd dare venture up the mountain for fear of their catches being poached.

"Late core formation!" Cultivators at the same stage could easily make out each other's levels. The two core formation hunters—one early and one mid-stage—knew they couldn't win against Mo Tianliao.

There were vast differences between each minor level within the core formation stage when it came to spiritual energy reserves. Mo Tianliao was an exception to the rule: The average cultivator backed down when they encountered someone with higher cultivation.

Mo Tianliao was taken aback. He'd still been in the mid stage yesterday; how could he be in the late stage now? He looked into himself. The golden core in his energy core was a vivid color with a solid structure; it was also comparable in size to the golden core of a nascent soul cultivator. It was true—he was at late stage. Could it have been the dual cultivation? His heart clenched at the thought. Did the boost in his cultivation mean that Qingtong's cultivation had dropped?

Growing anxious now, Mo Tianliao lost all patience for idle chatter with these people. The arrow left the bow, brimming with spiritual power as it hurtled toward the speaking core formation cultivator.

The man reacted quickly and turned aside to dodge the blow. But Taishi's master was within ten feet and so he had a mind of his own. When

he missed, he turned around for another strike.

“Get into formation!” the man shouted as he evaded the arrow.

Those who could still move quickly regrouped and leaped in four directions, including the one engaged in battle with Shuangren. Shuangren hurried to pick his sister up and joined Mo Tianliao.

When Shuanghua had left her brother’s arms earlier, she’d left behind the anti-Spirit-Disciplining Horn artifact in Shuangren’s clothes, so her spirit soul had taken some hits. As her brother lifted her up, she obediently turned into a fox and shrank back into his embrace.

Fellow disciples traded glances without saying a word.

Mo Tianliao looked at the formation the hunters had set up and muttered in surprise. This formation was quite ingenious; it took at least four people using six array flags to create multiple trapping and illusion effects like this.

The scenery before them changed. Flat ground became littered with spikes, making it look as though they were in Avici Hell, awash in fresh blood. Mo Tianliao mounted his flying sword and rose into the air. Although this was an illusion, it was formed from real spiritual power and could still cause injuries.

Shuangren, far more nervous than Mo Tianliao, followed suit and charged in a random direction with a howl.

Mo Tianliao frowned. The kid must have seen an illusion. This formation must have been specifically designed to be more effective against spirit beasts. While Shuangren swung his sword at his nonexistent enemy, Mo Tianliao calmly observed the formation. The fastest way to break it was to find the eye of the array. Of course, there were other methods too, such as destroying the formation from the outside.

Flames rained down from above. Spirit beasts with low intelligence would panic, but Mo Tianliao simply waved it away. This place appeared to be an endless, empty wasteland, aside from the spikes and black stones stained with blood. There was nothing particularly special about any of it.

“Hey!” shouted a clear, melodious voice from a short distance away. Mo Tianliao looked back, and his pupils contracted. The voice belonged to

a man dressed in white, with snow-white hair and flawless features—it was Qingtong.

He beckoned to Mo Tianliao, but when Mo Tianliao didn't go over, he looked vexed and moved forward. Suddenly, spikes erupted from the ground, piercing through his bare feet.

"Ahh…it hurts…so much…" Qingtong's weak moans of pain sounded exactly the same as when the old injuries on his divine soul had acted up.

"My darling!" Even though he knew it was an illusion, Mo Tianliao's heart ached. He rushed over and was about to hug him when the expression in the eyes of the illusory Qingtong shifted. Mo Tianliao jerked back, abruptly furious. He now knew where the eye of the array was. It was this being in the illusion. To a spirit beast, this was likely their closest kin. For humans, it was the one they thought about the most. Only by destroying the illusion would they be able to break the spell formation. This was indeed a vicious array.

Mo Tianliao didn't want to hurt Qingtong, even if he was just an illusion. He summoned Taishi, turned him into a bow and arrow, and sent him flying in a random direction. He was going to break the formation from the outside. Taishi was a spiritual intelligence of the universe: He had no soul, so he was immune to the illusion array. All he saw was four people brandishing weird flags and his master bobbing around bizarrely in place.

The arrow left the bowstring with no target in its crosshair, but Taishi instinctively adjusted its direction toward one of the flag-holders. The men in the formation paid it no mind. Weapons were automatically deflected by the array, so there was no chance for it to hurt—

Their complacency didn't last long. A foundation establishment cultivator took a hit to his dantian and fell to the ground.

A corner of the illusion array collapsed, and the illusion before Mo Tianliao's eyes disintegrated. Mo Tianliao summoned back the arrow and turned him into a longsword. The illusory Qingtong had put him in a very foul mood, and the memories of what had happened yesterday kept replaying in his mind. When the demon lord was in a foul mood, bloodshed always followed.

The tortoiseshell longsword blazed with fire-element spiritual power as it cleaved down on the hunters. The two core formation cultivators joined forces to block the blow with their broadswords. Shuangren, meanwhile, having regained his senses, attacked the foundation establishment cultivators. The disparity between a foundation establishment and a core formation cultivator was huge, and he was more than capable of handling the three remaining men.

An ordinary treasure artifact couldn't hold up against a blow from a divine artifact, and the two hunters' broadswords shattered. Flames from Mo Tianliao's longsword snaked up their hilts toward the hunters.

Fire needed wood to spread, and that applied to fire condensed from fire spiritual energy. But this greenish flame was so bizarre that it burned through metal. The two quickly discarded what was left of their broadswords and announced their surrender, preferring to take a financial loss over risking death. "Look, this is just how we make a living. Since you want these two foxes, you can have them!"

Mo Tianliao disregarded their pleas for mercy, intent as he was on killing them. "These foxes were mine to begin with. They are not yours to give away!"

Seeing his murderous intent, the hunters realized there was no escape and decided to fight to the death. Mo Tianliao fought against both of them at once effortlessly. The core formation cultivator who had been shot through the chest earlier swallowed half a bottle of pills and charged at him with his blade.

Plants grew in a frenzy, and thick vines surrounded them. Cultivators at the late core formation stage had abundant enough spiritual power to unleash one ultimate move; Mo Tianliao could finally fight without restraint. He drained the life from the vines, causing them to wither and dry up before erupting into flames.

The three trapped within the vines screamed and broke free of them, attempting to put out the fire. One of them with the water attribute summoned forth water from the Ice Springs of the snowy mountains. The fire sputtered as most of the flames on the surface were extinguished, but a few clusters of green flames wouldn't die out; instead, when the water from the Ice Springs doused them, they raged with even greater intensity.

Mo Tianliao rarely used woodfire against his enemies. Woodfire was a rare spiritual fire created by the universe, and it was extremely valuable. It drew too much attention, especially in the hands of a core formation cultivator. But he wanted these hunters dead today, and dead men couldn't give away secrets.

The sheer audacity, using his Pawpaw as an illusion. Unforgivable! Just like Ding Ziyu, who'd dared hurt Qingtong with *his* bracer. They all deserved to be ground into mincemeat.

Shuangren finished off the three foundation establishment cultivators and turned to see Mo Tianliao furiously slashing at the already dead men. Worried, he rushed over to grab Mo Tianliao's hand. "Enough, Shixiong!"

Mo Tianliao glared at him, his eyes bloodred. When he saw that it was Shuangren, though, he shook his head, and the red vanished from his eyes. His brows creased as he looked at the group of dead hunters. He motioned for Shuangren to take their inventory pouches and dispose of all traces of the bodies.

There was nothing valuable in the pouches, but it was still better than nothing. Mo Tianliao gave them all to Shuangren. The broke fox was delighted—he wanted to dump them all out to sift through their contents, but Mo Tianliao stopped him.

"We should hurry back. Shizun must be worried."

"Shizun is here too?" Shuangren's eyes lit up. He put away the pouches and followed behind Mo Tianliao.

Mo Tianliao didn't like looking at his excited face. "Aren't you going back to your tribe?"

"No hurry. We just went back to hide from Liuyun Sect's search party. Since Shizun is here, I'll follow him, of course." Shuangren grinned. In his eyes, the master who rescued him from the demon lair was his god. He didn't even dare to look at him in the eyes whenever they met, and just being by his master's side filled him with indescribable bliss.

Listening to Shuangren rambling to his sister about how his master was so handsome, so powerful, Mo Tianliao regretted opening his stupid mouth. He should have just left without saying anything. Why did he have to blab that their master was here too?! Finding his junior too noisy, Mo

Tianliao “kindly” reminded him of his injuries and suggested he turn into a little ball of fluff and let him carry him back.

At the sight of the magnificent crystal palace, the two foxes’ jaws dropped. They followed Mo Tianliao in a daze. When the crystal doors closed, shutting out the snow and wind outside, the interior was as warm as spring.

Mo Tianliao took off his cloak, pulled out the long-furred deer, and tossed it into the kitchen before bounding his way up the stairs. “Baby, guess what I brought—” Mo Tianliao paused at the top of the stairs. The man on the bed was sitting up, having been woken up by the noise downstairs. Two fluffy ears with mussed-up fur had popped out in his sleep, and his inner garment was half opened, revealing a fair chest decorated with red marks.

Mo Tianliao threw the foxes in his hand down the stairs without a second thought. Shuangren hit the ground with his sister in his paws, flattening into a literal fox rug.

Cold eyes looked at Mo Tianliao, while the ears on Qingtong’s head twitched back and forth in curiosity. “What did you bring?”

Mo Tianliao walked over to the bed and smiled as he stroked the top of his head. “Something delicious. You’ll—”

But he didn’t manage to finish telling Qingtong what he’d brought. His vision went black, and he collapsed face-first onto the bed.

Chapter 78:
Healing

"MO TIANLIAO?" Qingtong nudged him, but there was no reaction. He hurried to his feet and pulled Mo Tianliao into a flat position. With a hand on his wrist, he examined him carefully. Apart from the previous injuries that had yet to heal, there were no new wounds. What was going on?

"Shizun, what…happened…" Hearing his master's startled cry, Shuangren struggled to get up from the floor. He instructed his sister to wait downstairs, then transformed into his human form and ran upstairs…only to find his partially undressed master holding his second senior in his arms.

What kind of scandalous sight had he stumbled upon?! The fur on Shuangren's tail puffed up—but fortunately, he was in his human form and didn't actually have a tail right now. Silently, he turned around and tried to escape downstairs.

"Hold it." Qingtong stopped his youngest disciple. "What happened earlier?"

Shuangren turned back and cast a quick glance at his ethereal master, who was now properly dressed apart from the outer robe made of silk woven by the merfolk. His hair was black again, too, and his eyes radiated authority. Shuangren blinked. Had he imagined things just before?

Qingtong frowned as he listened to his youngest disciple recount what had happened earlier, especially at the mention of Mo Tianliao's red eyes during combat.

Mo Tianliao suddenly grunted, and all the surrounding spiritual energies surged frantically toward him. As Qingtong was still checking his pulse, even the spiritual energy in his own body began to flow toward Mo Tianliao. The movement of his vital force gave him a stabbing pain, and Qingtong quickly withdrew his hand.

"Shizun!" Seeing Qingtong's discomfort, Shuangren rushed over to support him. "Is Second Shixiong…advancing to the next stage?"

His senior, who had still been in the mid core formation stage just a few days ago, had progressed to the late stage by the time they met up again. That could be explained away as an accumulated carryover from his previous advancement, but what about *this* breakthrough?

Qingtong shook his head and took out eighteen high-grade spiritual stones. With a wave of his hand, he scattered them evenly around the bed. “Go downstairs. No matter what happens, don’t come up unless I summon you.”

Seeing his master’s grave expression, Shuangren nodded and fled downstairs.

Qingtong waved a hand to set up a sound barrier and felt another wave of pain as his dantian protested the use of his vital force. He willed the crystal palace into changing to a creamy white color, making the walls and floors opaque.

Mo Tianliao was like a massive vortex drawing in all the spiritual energy around him. In no time at all, the eighteen spiritual stones had blanched and shattered into grayish residue. Qingtong replenished them with another handful. If he was guessing correctly, last night’s dual cultivation had pushed Mo Tianliao’s cultivation to the late core formation stage. But he hadn’t realized it, and then he’d ended up wound tight with tension, suppressing his dantian from absorbing the spiritual energy it needed. Now he needed to make up for it. Fortunately, the mountain was full of spiritual energies, and he had a sufficient supply of spiritual stones as well.

In the end Mo Tianliao lay there absorbing spiritual energy from noon to dusk, and during that time, he was lost in a long dream.

The dream was chaotic and disordered. The vast, silent valley before him looked familiar, with sparse undergrowth and a short tree standing in the center. A tiny snow-white cat perched shakily on the treetop and cried out to him in a feeble voice. “Meow—”

The Annihilation Valley!

“My precious!” Mo Tianliao walked over and reached out to the cat. Why were they back here again? An ominous sense of foreboding nagged at him. They needed to leave quickly.

Seeing him, the cat happily ran over, but light suddenly flared from the blue bracer on his wrist, resonating with the bracelet on the cat's paw. The sudden attack sent the cat flying. Mo Tianliao felt his blood freeze. He ran over to check on his cat.

The scene before him changed. Emerald grass turned to black rocks and spikes all over the ground. Qingtong, in his human form, was lying on the ground, pierced through by countless spikes, his snow-white robe stained crimson.

"Qingtong…" Mo Tianliao ran over frantically to pull the spikes out, only to be met with his weak moans of pain.

You brought this on yourself! A muffled voice echoed endlessly in his ears like sudden claps of thunder. *It's all your fault!* You left him a bracer that could reflect killing intent! He was in agony for a whole three hundred years because of you, and this is how you repay him! He's going to die! You're going to lose your cat forever! Ha ha ha ha ha!

No! No! Mo Tianliao shouted in his dream. He unleashed a huge fire dragon at the sky. He had to rip the heavens to shreds and tear everything apart! Only then would his beloved Qingtong return!

Qingtong sat by the bedside, watching as sweat broke out on Mo Tianliao's forehead. He was making whimpering sounds, and his body was no longer absorbing spiritual energies. Qingtong brushed the spiritual stone residue aside and patted his cheek. "Mo Tianliao, wake up!"

Mo Tianliao clenched his jaw so tightly that the veins in his neck bulged. His eyes snapped open. There was no sign of the usual tenderness in his eyes—they were bloodred.

His inner demons!

Putting a palm around Mo Tianliao's neck, Qingtong quickly touched foreheads with him.

Mo Tianliao howled and struggled. Spiritual energies coursed around him as he grew more and more violent. It felt like he was about to tear everything around him apart—except Qingtong, whom he subconsciously avoided, unwilling to hurt him.

Left with no choice, Qingtong crawled on top of Mo Tianliao and pinned down his flailing limbs. He leaned in close to press their foreheads against each other again, channeling his own spirit soul into Mo Tianliao to soothe his inner demons.

Mo Tianliao's divine soul was running amok in his psyche, thrashing about uncontrollably. The lustrous spirit circled over and gently enveloped it, snuffing out the red glow within.

Mo Tianliao gradually calmed down, though his consciousness was still clouded. He sensed the sweet scent beside him, though, and he inched closer, craving it.

Before the spiritual energies in Taixuan had been tainted by demonic energy, inner demons had been merely bottlenecks in one's cultivation that could be overcome through enlightenment. But after the change, inner demons had become capable of driving cultivators over the edge. When attacked by inner demons, one's consciousness became muddled and spiritual energy ran rampant. Low-level cultivators could suppress it somewhat with elixirs, but it was much more difficult for high-level cultivators. In severe cases, the cultivator could even self-destruct, leading to death.

This was why everyone wanted spirit beasts, and why it was so important to sign a blood pact with one. Someone like Pawpaw, who could soothe another person's divine soul at critical moments even without a blood pact, was truly one of a kind in the cultivation world.

The crimson in Mo Tianliao's eyes receded, making him look as if he'd come to his senses…but he hadn't at all. Sniffing an enticing scent on Qingtong, he suddenly rolled them both over and pinned Qingtong under him. He bit down on Qingtong's fair neck as he pulled apart the snow-white robe and reached in to fondle him.

Spirit beasts were vulnerable and completely defenseless while in the process of soothing a divine soul, and Qingtong was caught off guard. The moment their foreheads separated, the soothing effect was cut off.

Mo Tianliao kissed and sucked him with wild abandon, and didn't hold back his strength as he groped Qingtong. Qingtong frowned in pain and whacked Mo Tianliao on the head with his hand. "Behave yourself!"

Mo Tianliao paused mid-action. Before he could keep going, Qingtong rolled them over and pinned him down in return. Mo Tianliao tried to resist, only to be rewarded with a punch in the face.

After a solid beating, Mo Tianliao behaved himself. His mind had cleared up a little, and he lay there motionlessly as Qingtong soothed his divine soul.

In his psyche, his divine soul—now calm—stood quietly and watched the lustrous white spirit soul float over. He opened his arms to receive it, and the spirit soul wrapped around him to provide relief. Mo Tianliao didn't remain idle either. He embraced Qingtong's spirit soul, which looked just like his physical body, and slipped a part of himself into it while Qingtong was focused on purging his inner demons. Qingtong let out a sweet moan as the comforting pleasure of their soul fusion spread throughout his body. Mo Tianliao wrapped his arms around Qingtong, who was pinning him down, and gently kissed his pale, thin lips. The divine soul in his consciousness reached even deeper.

Qingtong went limp against Mo Tianliao, his eyelids fluttering. Mo Tianliao caressed the nape of his neck with a thinly calloused hand as if soothing a sleeping cat. After a round of fusion, they'd both started breathing heavily. Mo Tianliao's eyes had returned to black. He leaned in to continue the kiss—but Qingtong stopped him from getting any closer.

"If you're better now, you can get up!"

"Not yet." Mo Tianliao shifted his body, deliberately brushing a certain part of his anatomy against him. "See, there's still one part that needs relief."

Dumbfounded, Qingtong slapped him and got up to leave. This man was really getting more and more shameless!

"Babe!" Mo Tianliao sat up and wrapped his arms around the fleeing man. "My cultivation suddenly got a boost."

"Duh." Qingtong elbowed him.

"I'm serious. Listen." Mo Tianliao caught his elbow and turned him around to face him. "How about your cultivation? Any damage or loss?" He was most worried about a potential drain on Qingtong's cultivation. If there

was any loss, he wouldn’t bring up dual cultivation again before he returned to the soul transformation stage.

Qingtong lowered his eyes. There was a long pause. “…No.”

“Really?” Mo Tianliao’s eyes lit up. The law of balance in the universe dictated that when one nets a gain, another must suffer a loss. So how could Qingtong be fine?

Taishi flew out from under the bed and transformed into a big chattering mouth. “Heh heh, the ancient great spirits cultivate with this technique. How are they supposed to keep up if one party’s cultivation is drained to benefit the other?”

The dual cultivation methods being passed down in the cultivation world today always boosted one party at the expense of the other. While cultivation partners using the heaven-grade Nectar of Intimacy could protect each other, they’d receive no cultivation assistance. But this dual cultivation technique of the ancient great spirits was different.

Long ago, in the primordial era, when there weren’t any cultivation techniques, the great spirits had cultivated by absorbing the spiritual energies of the universe and the essences of the sun and moon. During dual cultivation they could accelerate the absorption rate of spiritual energies, and even complement each other. To great spirits, dual cultivation was truly its own form of cultivation, not just for pleasure.

Mo Tianliao’s lips slowly spread into a wide grin. This should’ve been too good to be true, but it was real! Strictly speaking, in his present body, he could be said to be a spirit himself; since he still had his divine soul, all he needed to advance was to absorb enough spiritual energy. Didn’t that align perfectly with the mysteries of the ancient great spirits’ dual cultivation techniques?!

Seeing him grin himself silly, Qingtong rewarded him with a slap. “If you’re fine now, get up and cook.” Hadn’t he said he’d brought something delicious back?

“Who said I’m fine?” Mo Tianliao pounced on Qingtong like a starving tiger, pushing him down. “I told you, there’s still a part that needs relief.”

Qingtong raised his hand to hit him.

“Don’t use your vital force. It’ll hurt,” Mo Tianliao cautioned him gently as he untied his waist sash. “Don’t worry. After a few more times, your injuries will be fully healed.”

The sun descended in the west. Outside the window, snow fluttered down.

Shuanghua squatted beside the long-furred deer and swallowed. She turned to her brother, who kept glancing upstairs. “Gege, when can we eat?”

Shuangren flicked his tail. “I don’t know. Shizun is tending to Second Shixiong’s injuries, so it’ll probably take a long time.”

Shuanghua climbed onto the deer and curled into a ball. “Then let’s sleep here. We’ll know when your second shixiong comes to roast the meat.”

Shuangren thought that made sense. He jumped up to huddle together with his sister.

The night was still long. Who knew when they’d finally get to eat roasted meat?

MINI EXTRA

The Omnipotence of Dual Cultivation

Woodworker: Shizun, my inner demons are acting up. I need to dual cultivate.

Woodworker: Shizun, you’re hurt. Come dual cultivate.

Woodworker: Shizun, I’ve been feeling pretty overheated lately…

Shizun: You even need to dual cultivate for that, meow?

Woodworker: Of course. Only dual cultivation can reduce the fire in me, ehe he.

Chapter 79:
Visitors

THE NEXT MORNING, the sunlight was obstructed by the tinted walls, managing only to filter through the sheer gauze curtains at the window to cast dim shadows upon the ground.

A tortoiseshell stalk of foxtail grass stood by the bedside, quietly reaching under Mo Tianliao's nose to tickle it. When there was no reaction, Taishi wiggled his slender stem and tried again. Mo Tianliao grabbed the mischievous foxtail grass with his eyes still closed and threw him under the bed, following up with a fireball.

"Yow!" Taishi only managed a howl before Mo Tianliao forcibly shut him up with his divine sense, turning him into a silent burning candlestick. What the heck? His master was the one who'd told him to wake him up so that he could cook for the kittycat! What a gross injustice!

That single yowl was enough to make the man in Mo Tianliao's arms stir, though. He frowned, looking like he was about to wake up.

"It's nothing, my darling," Mo Tianliao coaxed softly, patting him on the back.

Maybe it just was because he was so worn out, but when Qingtong heard that familiar voice, he fell back asleep. His long, dense eyelashes drooped like two tiny fans, hiding the sight of the dark circles under his eyes. The corners of his eyes still bore a faint red tint.

Last night had been quite intense, and Qingtong had ultimately been unable to withstand both the union of their bodies and the fusion of their divine souls. His hair had turned the color of snow, and his two furry ears had involuntarily popped out. The change had aroused Mo Tianliao so much that he lost control and moved with even greater ferocity, until tears had glistened in those light-colored glass eyes.

The thought of last night worked Mo Tianliao up again. Swallowing hard, he gingerly set the man in his arms onto the pillow and covered him with a blanket. He slipped quietly out of bed. Qingtong was already so

tired. If he started trying to manhandle him again… He looked down at the scratch marks on his shoulders. Well, he'd become worse than just wood shavings.

After he'd gotten dressed, he picked up Taishi, who was playing dead on the ground, and headed downstairs.

The hall was quiet. Mo Tianliao snapped his fingers, and the walls on the first level turned transparent. The sunlight wasn't that bright, as the sky outside was still overcast; it just seemed brighter because it reflected off the snow. It was still snowing heavily, and a thick mound of snow had already accumulated before the door.

The light woke the two foxes sleeping on the long-furred deer, and they lifted their heads to greet Mo Tianliao. Shuangren leaped down and transformed into his human form.

"Second Shixiong, are you all right?"

Mo Tianliao was completely sated; he looked refreshed and not at all like someone who'd been injured. Instead, it was their still-sleeping master who made for the more worrying sight.

"I'm fine." Mo Tianliao looked at the fox that was still crouching on the deer, watching him with expectant eyes. His lips curved into a smile, and he bent down to ask, "Craving some roasted meat now, are we, little guy?"

Shuanghua nodded so quickly it made her ears flap. Mo Tianliao couldn't resist reaching out to pet her, but Shuangren stopped him and scooped the little fox away. "Shixiong, men and women should keep their distance."

Ah, he'd almost forgotten. This was his junior's sister, who would be a pretty young maiden in her human form. He couldn't just touch her as he pleased. Mo Tianliao cleared his throat. "I got carried away for a moment. Please don't take offense, Shidi."

Shuangren smiled, not minding it at all. He knew his second senior was a gentleman. So many female disciples from their sect had their sights on him, but he was never in the least bit swayed.

Mo Tianliao dragged the long-furred deer outside, where, with a wave of his hand, he cleared the snow before the door. Transforming Taishi into a blade, he set about skinning the deer.

“I’m a divine artifact,” Taichi complained as it worked. “Doesn’t it prick your conscience to make me do this kind of chore?”

“This is important.” Mo Tianliao was unfazed as he deftly peeled off the deer’s hide. This kind of long-furred deer was unique to the snowy mountain, and its thick fur was perfect for mats or rugs.

Shuangren placed his sister on his head and came out to join him. “Let me help.”

Mo Tianliao readily agreed. He handed the deer hide to Shuangren to wash while he took the butchered deer meat inside.

Taishi turned into a big mouth to give him suggestions. “Roast the legs and stew the tendons.”

Annoyed, Mo Tianliao turned Taishi into a long skewer, threaded the meat onto him, and roasted it over the fire. Stew was a good idea, but Mo Tianliao didn’t know how to make it.

Shuangren worked quickly, and it didn’t take long before he’d washed the hide and cleaned the blood from the steps. Finally, he turned back into a fox and crouched at the kitchen door with his sister, watching Mo Tianliao expectantly.

Mo Tianliao broke out into a laugh when he turned back to see the two fluffballs staring unblinkingly at the venison. “Who here knows how to make deer tendon stew?”

Shuanghua blinked, and turned into a maiden in a white dress. “I-I do.”

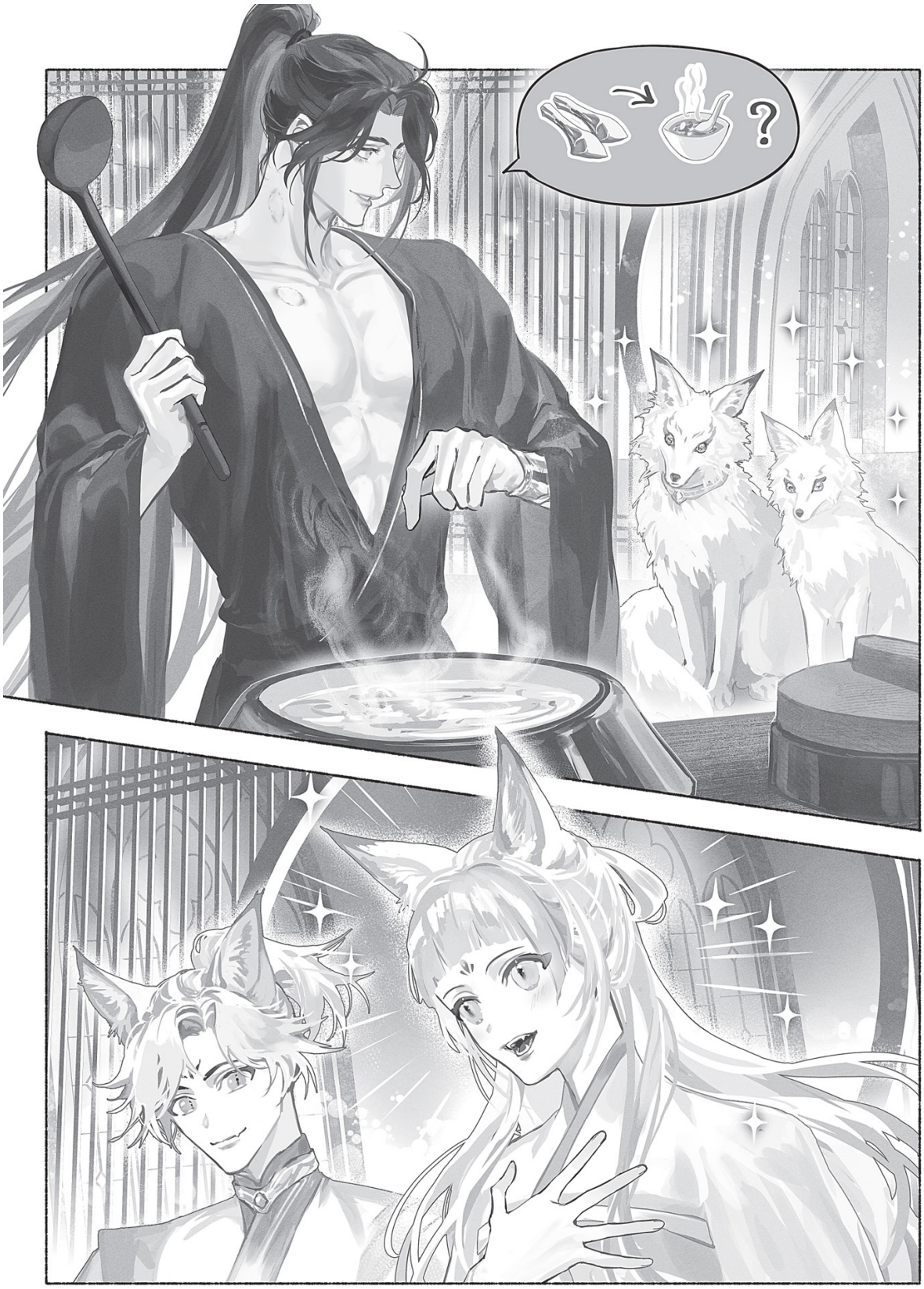
Mo Tianliao left the kitchen and the matter of the deer to the two foxes and stretched lazily. He sat cross-legged on the plush couch in the hall and looked within. The spiritual energies he’d absorbed yesterday hadn’t been wasted. And he’d absorbed a lot from last night’s dual cultivation, too. Between that and the exchange with Qingtong’s spirit soul, his late core formation cultivation was now stable. Perhaps if he dual cultivated for a few more days, he’d be able to form a nascent soul.

Mo Tianliao was dumbfounded by the rate at which his cultivation was progressing. After returning to life with his divine soul intact, he'd thought he'd be able to return to the soul transformation stage within twenty years—but it had barely been two.

The divine tree body was truly a treasure, worth every moment of the century he'd waited.

Once the foxes had roasted the meat and prepared the stew, Mo Tianliao sliced off the best meat from the hindquarter and arranged it on a jade plate. Then he ladled a bowl of stew and carried them both upstairs. The two foxes each hugged a deer leg and gnawed away determinedly.

Mo Tianliao changed the rest of the crystal palace's walls to be transparent, brightening it up instantly. Qingtong burrowed deeper into the blankets and covered his face.



Lips pressed into a soft smile, Mo Tianliao dug him out from under the blanket and wiped his face with a towel. “Have a bowl of stew before you go back to sleep, darling.”

While dual cultivation might boost cultivation, it also consumed vital essence, so Qingtong had to take some tonic food to nourish himself.

The two little foxes were so small that it didn’t take them long to eat their fill. While they were crouching on the stairs, grooming each other, Mo Tianliao’s tragic scream reverberated through the air. “Ow! Shizun! I’m sorry!”

***

THE SNOW FELL FOR THREE DAYS and three nights. It was extremely chilly outside, so Qingtong stayed indoors, leaning against the plush couch by the wall on the second floor and lazily gazing out of the window. He tapped his fingers against the transparent walls as if itching to catch the dancing snowflakes. One fox pillow stayed obediently still under his resting head while the other fox curled up by his hands to keep them warm .

It was this sight that Mo Tianliao returned to after venturing outdoors to gather information. He frowned. Hadn’t Shuangren preached about improper contact between men and women? Why was he letting his sister warm Qingtong’s hands? So much for propriety.

His face darkened, and he stewed in his anger for a moment before walking over. “Why didn’t you use a blanket to keep warm?” he snapped, covering Qingtong with a woolen blanket.

Qingtong looked back at him. “What have you found out?”

“The grand summit has ended. After you disappeared, our sect leader personally went to demand answers from Liumang-zhenren. Ding Hu hasn’t regained consciousness, so no one knows what happened.” Mo Tianliao took off his chilly outer robe and crawled under the blanket on the plush couch with Qingtong. He pulled the little fox from Qingtong’s hand, set her

next to Shuangren the pillow, and brazenly lay down on her. Displeased, Shuangren nipped his ear.

“Your identity will be exposed if Ding Hu comes to,” said Qingtong, holding out his hand to examine his extended fingers. In his previous life, Mo Tianliao had killed people from almost every sect, from the orthodox to the unorthodox sects. There was no knowing just how many people would come seeking vengeance if his identity were exposed.

“It can’t be helped.” Mo Tianliao grasped Qingtong’s fingers and rested his chin on his shoulder. “With danger imminent, we only have one way out.”

“Which is?” Qingtong turned to look at him.

Mo Tianliao pressed down on him and gave him a light peck on the lips. “What do you think?” Of course, it was to make the best of their time and dual cultivate so that he could return to the soul transformation stage soon. The fur on the fox pillow’s tail stood on end.

“Why don’t we go into seclusion here for a year or so and— Ouch!” A bite to the nose was enough to make Mo Tianliao behave himself.

The fox pillow squirmed out from under his master. Turning into his human form, he dragged Mo Tianliao off the couch. “Second Shixiong, how can you commit such blasphemy against Shizun?!” Shuangren’s face was flushed red with anger. How dare he take liberties with their master while Qingtong was still injured?! The little fox couldn’t believe the second senior he admired would be so shameless!

“Blasphemy indeed, heh heh heh!” gloated Big Mouth Taishi, never one to miss a show.

Mo Tianliao grabbed the fox by the arm before he could draw his sword. “Shidi, calm down.”

Seeing her brother being bullied, the other fox bounded over to bite him, and the room descended into chaos. Qingtong rested his head on his hand and lay on his side on the couch, watching them calmly.

Just then, though, they were interrupted by a knock on the door.

Mo Tianliao glanced at his master, who clearly wasn’t planning on intervening, and dragged the two foxes downstairs with him to open the

door. The walls were transparent, so he got a clear look outside when he descended to the first floor. There, huddled outside the door amid the white expanse of snow, were over a dozen foxes.

The old fox in the lead transformed into an old man with a white beard and respectfully bowed to Mo Tianliao. “I am the patriarch of the Frostfox tribe on this snowy mountain. I’ve sensed the presence of a great spirit here, and thus have brought my tribe with me to pay our respects.”

“Grandpa!” Shuanghua jumped down from Mo Tianliao’s sleeve and bounded over.

Chapter 80:
Trouble

"SHUANGHUA! YOU'RE SAFE!" The old fox was thrilled to see the siblings.

Mo Tianliao frowned. He'd forgotten that Shuangren's tribe had divine souls far more sensitive than ordinary spirit beasts. Shuangren could alleviate headaches just by being a pillow. It stood to reason that these foxes could sniff out Pawpaw's aura at such a close distance—it was just like the way Shuangren had run directly to the brothel from the auction. The aura of ancient great spirits couldn't be hidden from Soul-Soothing Frostfoxes.

But that didn't mean Mo Tianliao would let them see Qingtong. These were all wild spirit beasts that might be caught someday to sign blood pacts. Once they were under control of a pact, they might spill everything.

"What's all the din about?" tinkled a clear, melodious voice. Mo Tianliao was too late to stop Qingtong from descending the stairs, dressed in his snow-white outer robe made of merfolk silk.

Excited, the fox patriarch took two steps forward, but Mo Tianliao intercepted him with an outstretched hand. He'd have to think twice if he thought he could get past Mo Tianliao by feigning excitement. Mo Tianliao, master of the cat house, hadn't agreed to allow these foxes in!

Realizing his blunder, the old fox quickly retreated out of the door and led his fellow foxes in a formal kowtow. "Greetings to the Great Spirit!"

Mo Tianliao's expression darkened. This old man was shouting it so loudly right at the entrance to their house—was he trying to announce it to the entire world?

Qingtong didn't mind, though, and allowed the foxes to enter. When they learned Qingtong had saved the siblings, the foxes kowtowed again in thanks. They chatted for a while, and the foxes showed no intention of

leaving. According to the fox patriarch, it had been freezing outside lately, and the tribe's charcoal was running low.

Mo Tianliao looked at the group of foxes dozing on the rug in the hall, and his face darkened further. These fellows had said they were here to pay their respects, but they were actually here to freeload, weren't they?

"Shuangren swore a blood oath that he wouldn't tell anyone about the sect." Qingtong patted Mo Tianliao on the head, giving him a taste of his own medicine. He eyed the fluffy foxes with pleasure. The weather had been cold the past few days, and he could do with some more footrests and rugs.

And so, the next time Mo Tianliao returned from hunting, he saw the hall flooded with a sea of snow-white fur. The corners of his lips twitched as he plotted to get rid of these fellows. Sure, he liked little furry creatures, but he and Qingtong were in their "newlywed phase" right now. Shuangren and his sister were already an eyesore, and now there was a whole bunch of them.

As he was about to go upstairs, he noticed something odd about the pile of fur. On closer inspection, he found a cat lying on his back on top of the foxes splayed out motionlessly on the ground. He hadn't noticed him earlier because their fur was the same color…

Mo Tianliao hurried over and scooped up the cat.

"Meow?" The cat, roused from his sound sleep, yawned and patted Mo Tianliao's face with warm paw pads.

As soon as the cat had been picked up, the foxes on the ground stood up and huddled together, trembling. They'd lived on the snowy mountain for generations and hadn't seen much of the world. Their curiosity had been piqued when they caught the scent of an ancient great spirit, but once they got here, they found the place cozily warm, so they intended to stay for a few days. But spirit beasts with a higher bloodline had an oppressive effect on them. Whenever the cat came near, they couldn't stop trembling, somehow feeling as if they were about to be eaten. And the cat's cultivation was way higher than theirs, too! If he wanted to sleep on their heads, there was no way they could say no.

Mo Tianliao buried his nose in the cat's fur and sniffed—his sweet kitten reeked of foxes, and that displeased him even more. He carried the cat off for a bath. Afterward, he carried Qingtong in his human form onto the bed and marked him thoroughly inside and out with his own scent until at last he was satisfied.

"Since when did you become a dog?" Qingtong panted, shoving away the man who was rubbing himself all over him. Mo Tianliao was a block of wood, but here he was, marking his territory and leaving his scent everywhere.

Come evening, the old fox led his fellow foxes to bid them farewell. Mo Tianliao made no attempt to keep them and happily saw them off. Shuangren wanted the patriarch to take his sister back with them, but Mo Tianliao chimed in, "Shidi, it's been a while since you've gone home. Don't you want to visit too?"

Shuangren glared at his second senior. As if he didn't know what this guy was scheming—getting rid of him so he could have his way with their weak, injured master.

In the end, the patriarch dragged the two fox siblings away.

The snow outside grew heavier, falling like big goose feathers. Qingtong stood beside the transparent wall and looked out quietly. Mo Tianliao walked over and draped an outer robe around him. "Do you want to sit in the rocking chair upstairs?"

Mo Tianliao had already lined the exquisitely carved rocking chair on the top floor terrace with the hide of the deer he'd butchered and erected wind- and snow-proof barriers outside, so it was clean and warm. Mo Tianliao lay on the rocking chair first. Finding it a little cold, he patted his chest and motioned for Qingtong to lie on him. Qingtong pursed his lips in disdain, but he still walked over and plopped down. A pair of warm arms wrapped around his waist and draped a warm blanket around him.

On the horizon, the mountain ranges stretched out endlessly, blanketed in snow. The heavy snowfall seemed never-ending as it fluttered around them. The world had quieted down, as if they were the only ones in existence, snuggling against each other and keeping each other warm.

Qingtong pressed his cheek against Mo Tianliao's chest and nuzzled at him, and Mo Tianliao's heart tingled at his touch. He slowly stroked Qingtong's hair. These days with just the two of them like this were truly blissful. They'd been idling around like this for half a month now, and they hadn't felt bored at all. He wished they could carry on like this forever.

These days of wild indulgence had not only completely healed Qingtong's internal injuries—thanks to the inexhaustible regenerative power of the Undying Tree—but also massively boosted Mo Tianliao's own cultivation. Yesterday, his golden core had finally shattered, and he'd broken through to the nascent soul stage. Strangely enough, though, he hadn't formed a nascent soul in a human form. Instead, a tiny, tender sprout had appeared in his dantian.

Qingtong didn't find it surprising. "Your nascent soul is essentially your true form," he said. "Nothing strange about it." Even if a cultivator advanced to the soul transformation stage, their nascent soul always remained.

They'd been dual cultivating at that time, their bodies still entwined. Out of curiosity, Qingtong had released his own nascent soul—a cat—to scratch at the new sprout. The tiny sprout had swayed a little and slowly wrapped around the cat's paw.

"Actually, you're currently somewhere between nascent soul and soul transformation." Feeling a little cold, Qingtong burrowed deeper into the blanket.

Mo Tianliao nodded. He didn't just have this nascent soul, he also had a divine soul in the soul transformation stage. His nascent soul was still fragile. Only someone who had returned to life through possession would find themselves in such a peculiar state.

As they were talking, a long, clear cry echoed across the horizon. A snow eagle swept across the snowy plains, heading straight for them and crashing right into the protective barrier of the crystal palace.

Mo Tianliao opened the shield and let the eagle in.

A few days ago, Qingtong, concerned that the sect leader might be worried, had caught a snow eagle to send a letter to Woyun Sect. He hadn't expected a reply so soon.

Qingtong untied the jade slip from the eagle’s leg and swiped a finger over it, turning the message within into golden words that materialized in midair: *The demon palace is opening soon.* When are you returning? Also, Chubby has been captured.

Chubby had been captured? Mo Tianliao was taken aback—he’d forgotten until now that his eldest senior had gone with them to Liuyun Sect as their master’s soul companion. The master was gone, but the soul companion was still there. Clearly, something was off.

MINI EXTRA

Cultivator A: Who’d believe Qingtong-zhenren’s soul beast still hadn’t signed a blood pact?

Cultivator B: It’s a castrated tiger anyway. Not much use there.

Cultivator C: That can’t be. It has a tiger penis.

Cultivator A & B: Breed it!

Eldest Shixiong: QAQ Save me, Shizun!

Chapter 81:
Returning to the Sect

IF MENGHU HAD BEEN CAPTURED, that meant that someone had discovered he was an unbonded spirit beast. It wouldn't be too bad if they'd taken him for an ordinary spirit beast, but if someone realized he was an evolved spirit cultivator, things would get messy.

Over the years, Menghu had made a name for himself as a personal disciple of Woyun Sect. Plenty of people in the orthodox sects knew him. If word got out that Qingtong had taken an evolved spirit cultivator as a disciple, the sect would be in danger. The cultivation world's desire for spirit beasts was intense, and the pool of available spirit beasts was becoming increasingly scarce; they were often forced into signing a pact once captured. Many high-level cultivators couldn't get their hands on one at all. If the spirit cultivators in their sect were exposed, the whole sect would be in jeopardy.

As the saying went, *the innocent commoner who possesses a treasure must be guilty of a crime*—just like the Lord Duantian of yesteryear.

There was no time to waste. The two packed up and prepared to leave.

Actually, they didn't have much to do other than collect the cured meat and frozen drumsticks on the third-floor terrace and roll up the deer hide on the rocking chair. After that, they just needed to step out and put away the crystal palace.

Two foxes were crouching in wait at the door, looking at them with hopeful eyes.

It made sense for Shuangren to follow them back to the sect, but what was Shuanghua doing here?

Shuanghua turned into her human form and addressed Qingtong cautiously. "I know I don't have great aptitude. All I ask is to stay by the great spirit's side as an attendant."

Shuangren hadn’t told his sister about the sect. All she knew was that Qingtong was her brother’s master. She didn’t want to be separated from her brother, and she also wanted to learn some skills and see the outside world.

It was lonely on the snowy mountain. The spirit beasts here all slowly cultivated by absorbing the essence of the sun and the moon. While their days were carefree, it was also rather boring.

Cold, beautiful eyes swept over Shuanghua and stopped on Shuangren.

Shuangren kneeled in apology. “Please pardon me, Shizun. I only have this one close relative, and I really don’t feel comfortable leaving her alone in the valley.”

“Then let her serve as an attendant.” Qingtong lowered his eyes. Woyun Sect didn’t discriminate based on talent or origin and would take in any spirit beast that came seeking refuge, but Qingtong was quite particular about aptitude and aesthetics. Taking in one disciple who had a soft body and no claws was already pushing it. How could he accept a second one? Having her as an attendant would do.

Thrilled, Shuangren pulled his sister down to kowtow their thanks. He wasn’t holding out hope that his sister could become a disciple; he was happy for her to just be an attendant.

Mo Tianliao was displeased, though. One eyesore was annoying enough. Why take in another one? Qingtong, however, pointed out that it wouldn’t do to have no female spirit cultivators in the sect. If their disciples all ended up with boyfriends, there’d be no more little furballs for him to play with.

The corners of Mo Tianliao’s lips twitched. He had no comeback for that.

“How are we getting back?” Qingtong looked at Mo Tianliao. The journey back was a long one. Surely he wasn’t expecting them to fly on their swords all the way. All Mo Tianliao did these days was fool around, so he hadn’t had time to make a flying ship or anything. This was just great. They were stuck now.

Mo Tianliao scratched his head and rummaged through his inventory bracer, but he found nothing other than a generous handful of spiritual stones. He'd used up everything when he'd been fleeing for his life in his previous body, and his unparalleled flying ship had been destroyed too.

He looked at Taishi. While he could also turn into a flying ship, the available material was limited. Taishi had no problem turning into a longsword or axe, but as a flying ship, he'd be extremely flimsy and probably even riddled with holes. There was no way he'd be able to hold up.

"Um, we can ride the cat house back?" Mo Tianliao looked back at the crystal palace behind him.

"Hm?" Qingtong looked back at the towering palace too. "This works as a flying ship too?"

"As long as there are enough spiritual stones." Mo Tianliao smiled and ushered his beloved cat inside while he stayed outside to cast the spell. He formed a hand seal, creating a complex lotus seal as he embedded dozens of high-grade spiritual stones in the grooves at the corners of the crystal palace.

With a thunderous rumble, the crystal palace lifted off the ground and floated in the air.

Mo Tianliao flew up on his sword. Like any other flying ship, the palace shuddered in place for a moment before speeding forward. Caught off guard, Qingtong fell onto the bed. Mo Tianliao jumped up after him and held him in his arms as they rolled around. "How's my cat house for you? Pretty handy, right?"

"Does this thing fly fast?" Qingtong looked at the clouds racing past outside the walls. It didn't seem like he had much to worry about.

"Not too bad, I guess." Mo Tianliao sat up and embraced his precious cat as he watched the scenery outside. "It's much faster than the sect's flying ship."

It had taken over a month to fly to the Liuyun Sect on their sect's flying ship. The crystal palace wasn't exactly lightning fast, but it would be possible to make it back to the sect within ten days.

The expedition to the demon palace would take place in half a month's time. Among the three great sects, Woyun Sect was closest to the demonic path territories, so anyone from the orthodox sects who had a token would first gather at Woyun Sect before setting off together. And since Menghu had been captured, Xuanji would undoubtedly have found a way to bring the disciples and tiger back to the sect to reason with the other sects.

As expected, when they reached Woyun Sect, Xuanji and the others had also just arrived and were being crowded by the other two sects, who were making a ruckus at the entrance.

"The tiger belongs to my shidi, Qingtong-zhenren." Xuanji clutched his shell, suppressing the urge to lash out at these hypocrites. "Even if he's an evolved spirit cultivator who has yet to sign a blood pact, he's still his established soul companion. What gives you people the right to take him away?"

Elder Yunsong of Qingyun Sect, who had always been at odds with Qingtong, harrumphed. "Qingtong-zhenren privately allowed an unbonded spirit beast to cultivate and evolve. This is a huge threat to the cultivation world." He wouldn't miss an opportunity to implicate Qingtong.

Seeing how aggressive her senior was, Elder Yunyuan of Qingyun Sect stepped in to mediate. "Qingtong-zhenren has yet to appear. Perhaps he has his reasons. We should hear him out before we come to any conclusions."

"An unbonded spirit beast belongs to whoever finds it," said Elder Liubi of Qingyun Sect in a shrill voice. "Our Liuyun Sect caught it, so it's ours now. Finders keepers." Liubi was a woman too. Ding Hu had been injured during the grand summit and was still unconscious, and as the leader, Liumang-zhenren couldn't leave the sect, so they'd sent Elder Liubi to lead the disciples.

"Whoa, the nerve of you to say that when you people barged in here to capture our spirit beast." Zimo snorted. "By that logic, we can all go for a stroll at Liuyun Sect's back mountain and grab any unbonded ones we see. Finders keepers, yeah?"

Everyone knew Liuyun Sect reared many spirit beasts. The onlookers all nodded in agreement.

Liubi was at a loss for words. When she'd finally pulled herself together to respond, a dark shadow suddenly fell over them. Everyone looked up and was stunned at the sight of the massive palace hovering overhead.

They all recognized this crystal palace. This was the very spatial artifact that Mo Tianliao had created during the grand summit. Who would have guessed that it could even fly? Before anyone could react, the palace suddenly dropped like it had lost control. The shadow covered everyone. If they didn't dodge in time, they'd be squashed to a pulp.

Everyone scrambled out of the way to a chorus of shrieks from the female disciples. Disregarding the crowd, the crystal palace landed on the ground with a thunderous crash. A few people with high cultivation managed to keep their composure, but the disciples with low cultivation cut a rather sorry sight.

Mo Tianliao almost collapsed with laughter from where he stood on the second floor. The sudden plunge had sent the two foxes tumbling to the corners of the room. Meanwhile, Qingtong stood steadily beside Mo Tianliao and glared at the troublemaker…before quirking a smile himself. That had indeed been fun.

The door on the second floor opened, and a figure in white gracefully descended along with a man dressed in black robes.

"Shishu!"

"Tongtong!"

Those from Woyun Sect rushed over in delight, while the other sects wore a variety of expressions.

"It's great that Qingtong-zhenren is back," Yunyuan said with smiling eyes.

Liubi, who had always been at odds with Yunyuan, couldn't resist making a jab at her. "You're not even betrothed, and you're already so clingy. If the betrothal doesn't work out, won't you become a laughingstock?"

"You…" Yunyuan's face flushed red and she glared at Liubi, although she didn't deny anything.

Mo Tianliao frowned. What was with these women? He stepped forward to shield Qingtong. “Something cropped up a few days ago, and my shizun and I have been away. What happened while we were gone?”

“Qingtong-zhenren secretly harbors a spirit beast,” Yunsong said, his voice dripping with sarcasm. “We’ve come to demand an explanation.”

The thief crying thief—Mo Tianliao had to hand it to him. He was the one trying to snatch someone else’s spirit beast, and he still had the nerve to come and demand an explanation. Mo Tianliao was well acquainted with Qingyun Sect’s shamelessness. When Elder Yunhe led the others to the demon palace to besiege him, he had said the same words: *“You arbitrarily forged a divine artifact, threatening the safety of Taixuan.* We’ve come to demand an explanation.”

“Who took away my tiger?” Qingtong cut to the chase, his voice icy.

Mo Tianliao blatantly took Qingtong’s hand to put the crystal palace away in his inventory bracelet.

The others were so occupied with the spirit beast that they didn’t notice this little gesture, but Xuanji was standing beside them, and his eyes nearly popped out at the sight. Something must have happened during the time his junior had been missing.

“You’re all guests of our Woyun Sect. Now that you’re here, why don’t you come in instead of standing at the entrance?” a deep, steady voice said from the mountain path. Tianlang-zhenren, dressed in a gray-and-white cultivator robe, walked over with a smile and invited everyone in for tea.

Chapter 82:
Meal Bell

THE NOISY CROWD FELL SILENT at the sight of Tianlang-zhenren.

They had rushed to Woyun Sect straight from Liuyun Sect, taking those huge flying ships that couldn't be put away, so they'd moored them before the sect gates.

"Hold it." Qingtong held up a hand to intercept Liubi. "Where's Chubby?"

"You must be mistaken. Our Liuyun Sect isn't the one who captured him this time. It's your betrothed." Liubi covered her mouth with a handkerchief and tittered. She knew the "betrothal" was merely a rumor, a running joke about how the sect leader of Qingyun Sect had been pushing for it only to be rejected.

"Liubi, watch your mouth!" Yunyuan struck her palm out at Liubi. For what it was worth, she was the elder of a sect. While she *was* fond of Qingtong, the betrothal was still up in the air. Liubi was clearly mocking her.

Liubi flicked her soft handkerchief, turning it into a solid shield that blocked Yunyuan's blow. "Oh, my, why so worked up? I didn't even say who his betrothed was. Why are you so eager to admit it?"

Yunsong didn't interfere in his junior's fight. He merely watched Qingtong with a sneer. But Qingtong turned to him. "You're the one who caught him?"

Silence momentarily hung over the crowd. Liubi had just said it was his betrothed, and he'd gone and questioned Yunsong, making it seem like Yunsong was his betrothed. The others looked at Yunsong's wrinkled face and shifty, ratlike eyes, then at the ethereal being that was Qingtong…

"Calm down, Qingtong. Let them go in first," Tianlang said in a composed voice, stroking his beard with otherworldly poise. Everyone from

the other sects had to hand it to Tianlang-zhenren. He truly lived up to his reputation as the sect leader; his poise and demeanor were unmatched.

Displeased, Mo Tianliao stepped forward to pull Qingtong back, but the glare Qingtong shot him made him switch to supporting him instead. “Shizun, let’s go in first.”

The members of the other sects came to the one-and-a-half-mile-long rope bridge swaying perilously in the wind. They summoned their flying swords, only to realize that flying was impossible here.

“There are Sworddrop Stones on both sides of the cliff. I’m afraid you’ll have to cross the bridge on foot.” Tianlang-zhenren smiled kindly and led the way onto the bridge.

Sworddrop Stones on both sides of such high cliffs? Those visiting Woyun Sect for the first time found this absurd. Wasn’t this just to make things difficult for visitors?

In fact, even the elders who had been here before also felt that Woyun Sect was just trying to stir up trouble for the sake of it.

Yunyuan ended her fight with Liubi, straightened her skirt, and “casually” walked over to stand beside Qingtong. “As I recall, there was no such bridge when Qingming-zhenren was still around.”

Qingming-zhenren was Qingtong’s master. Allegedly, he’d progressed to the tribulation stage five hundred years ago. Cultivators at this stage would leave their sect to seek opportunities to undergo their tribulations, and there had been no news of Qingming since he left Woyun Sect.

Mo Tianliao smiled, changing direction to walk between Qingtong and Yunyuan. “So Yunyuan-zhenren is over a thousand years old? Oh, my apologies. My master isn’t even five hundred yet.”

Yunyuan’s expression soured. All women, even cultivators, were very sensitive about their age. He made it sound like she was an old hag and Qingtong was still a wee little lad. Coupled with Liubi’s mockery about the “betrothal”…

Qingtong glanced at Mo Tianliao with amusement in his eyes and transmitted privately to him: *Aren’t you almost a thousand years old*

yourself? Don’t you feel embarrassed to be taunting her?

Mo Tianliao raised an eyebrow and turned to whisper into his master’s ear. “I’m only eighteen this year.” *And you’re the old spirit who dragged me into your lair.* He didn’t dare to voice the last sentence, but his implication was clear. His hot breath turned that fair ear pink. Qingtong elbowed him and stepped onto the rope bridge.

Ignored by the master-disciple pair who acted as if she didn’t exist, an embarrassed Yunyuan stood rooted in place and waited for the rest of Qingyun Sect.

Disciples of Woyun Sect were used to traversing this bridge. Even outer disciples at the qi-refining stage could walk briskly over it with ease. But it was a different story for the other sects. Those arrogant core formation and nascent soul cultivators inched across, trembling with apprehension. There were Sworddrop Stones here, so if they fell, they wouldn’t be able to fly on their swords. No doubt they’d be smashed to smithereens.

Finally, they made it to the grand hall. They heaved a sigh of relief, only to see Yanlie in his scarlet robe smiling at them. “Welcome, honored guests. Since you’re all guests here, there’s no need to come bearing any gifts. Just return what belongs to our sect.”

He clapped his hands, summoning his disciples and motioning for them to check the two sects’ flying ships parked outside and retrieve Qingtong’s missing spirit beast.

“Hold it!” Yunsong objected with a sneer. “We still haven’t gotten to the bottom of Woyun Sect’s private harboring of evolved spirit cultivators, and you want to search our flying ships?”

Yanlie kept smiling. “What do you mean, ‘harboring’? It’s his own spirit beast.”

Outside, Chifeng, Chishan, and the others had already surrounded the flying ships, lest they take off with the tiger.

“Raising a spirit beast unbonded until it evolves is a threat to the entire cultivation world.” Yunsong spoke with righteous indignation. “If everyone does that and the spirit beasts end up being stronger, chaos will ensue!”

Spirit beasts were controlled by humans because they were scarce and outnumbered by human cultivators. Most were bound by blood pacts when they were young, and by the time they'd evolved, they were already docile soul companions. Evolved spirit cultivators in the wild were also bound with a blood pact once they were captured.

Spirit beasts had divine souls more powerful than those of human cultivators. If they were allowed to cultivate freely, then once the spiritfolk grew strong, they would surely seek revenge against human cultivators, and the cultivation world would collapse into anarchy.

The others nodded in agreement. Not only had Qingtong-zhenren not signed a blood pact with Menghu, he'd also taken him on as a personal disciple. It was truly mind-boggling.

"The spirit beast is mine. Who are you to teach me how to raise him?" Qingtong snorted. His meaning was clear: *You can't even beat me in a fight, so what right do you have to lecture me?*

"Oh? So, there must be several more spirit beasts hidden here, right?" Liubi dabbed the corner of her lips with her handkerchief and swept her eyes greedily over the members of Woyun Sect. "Anyone else here could secretly be a spirit beast."

Huaqing and Yuli, who were standing beside Xuanji, and Zimo, Bailuo, and Yanlie, who were standing beside Tianlang, felt a chill run down their backs as those eyes swept over them.

Narrowing her eyes, Liubi suddenly pulled out a long Spirit-Disciplining Horn from her sleeve and activated it with her powers. A resonant hum reverberated through the air.

Mo Tianliao's pupils contracted. The dual cultivation these days may have mended part of Qingtong's divine soul, but the restoration of a divine soul was a long process, and his soul was still incomplete. Even if Qingtong had the pendant he made for him, a Spirit-Disciplining Horn this size would still cause him discomfort.

As Liubi moved, Taishi turned into a streak of light that shot up to the roof, where he morphed into a giant, boisterously clanging bell and drowned out the shrill sound of the horn.

“Oh, please excuse us. It’s mealtime.” Mo Tianliao smiled and winked at Yanlie. “Yanlie-shixiong, did you prepare food for our guests today?”

“Of course.” Yanlie smoothly picked up the conversation. “Since the bell has rung, why don’t we eat first and continue our discussion later?”

“What do you mean, eat? You’re a cultivator!” Liubi was livid. Using a Spirit-Disciplining Horn in someone else’s sect was highly improper. She’d only resorted to it earlier because they were caught off guard. If she tried again, she would incur Tianlang’s wrath.

“Woyun Sect goes with the natural flow when it comes to cultivation. Eating is part of that,” Tianlang said solemnly. “We will not insist if you prefer to abstain from food. Feel free to just have a cup of tea instead.”

He then led those from Woyun Sect to Wotian Sanctum. The cultivators from Qingyun Sect and Liuyun Sect traded glances before following after them, curious to see what tricks they had up their sleeves.

In Wotian Sanctum’s dining hall, a tall man in black walked over carrying a tray of fragrant roast lamb chops. The sight of the crowd took him by surprise. “Are both shishu also dining in Wotian Sanctum today?” He looked down at the food in his hand and scratched his head. This was probably not enough; he’d need to cook more.

Qingtong and Xuanji hummed in acknowledgment and took their seats at the head of the table.

Mo Tianliao curiously observed the honest-looking man in black. This must be Moxiong, whom he’d never seen before. He heard he’d gone to fetch his youngest junior, Langzi.

The other cultivators had expected this to be a stalling tactic, but the folk from Woyun Sect actually sat down and began to feast on lamb chops and chicken drumsticks, while the guests were only served cups of plain tea.

As they watched these people eating with relish, their noses assailed by the aromas of food, even Yunsong, who’d been trying to pick a quarrel, couldn’t help but swallow hard.

MINI EXTRA

Yunsong: Let’s follow them and see what scheme they’re cooking up.

Big Bear: Oh, we’re cooking lots.

Zimo: Roasted chicken drumsticks, please.

Sect Leader: Grilled lamb chops for me.

Bailuo: I’d like hot and sour cabbage.

Yuli: Can I have deep-fried bugs?

Pawpaw: Gimme braised carp.

Yunsong: *Speechless*

Chapter 83:
Wolf Pup

NOTICING THERE weren't enough lamb chops, Mo Tianliao put on a full show and nudged Zimo, who was gnawing enthusiastically beside him. "Go help out."

"Why don't *you* go?" Zimo mumbled with the bone in his mouth.

"I need to attend to my shizun," Mo Tianliao said, carving the meat off the bones with a small jade knife and cutting it into bite-sized pieces which he served to Qingtong in a jade bowl.

Qingtong picked one up with his chopsticks and chewed carefully. He turned his head slightly to Zimo. "I want grilled fish."

"Yes, Shishu." Zimo grabbed a chop and dashed off like the wind, eating as he went. Yuli trembled.

As a respected sect leader of Woyun Sect, Tianlang was expected not to neglect his guests even during his meal. Yunsong and the others had initially meant to shift their attention to chatting with Tianlang-zhenren, but he turned out to be the most focused eater of them all. The jade chopsticks were too slippery to grip the bones, and he didn't have a dutiful disciple like Mo Tianliao to cut the meat for him, so Tianlang-zhenren threw all etiquette out of the window and ate with his hands.

He held the lamb chops in one hand and brushed his beard aside with the other to prevent the sauce from getting on it. His movements were graceful, although he ate quickly and gnawed a bone clean in just the blink of an eye.

"Uh…" Yunsong was about to grab the chance to speak when Tianlang picked up his second bone.

They finally made it through the meal, and the Woyun Sect folks began drinking their own tea.

Tianlang-zhenren took a sip and swallowed back the burp that was about to escape. He sighed. "About today—well, actually, the predecessors

of Qingyun Sect and Liuyun Sect were already aware of it centuries ago." This unexpected statement left Yunsong, Yunyuan, and Liubi perplexed. "It's a matter of great importance, and I can only tell the elders," Tianlang added, sweeping his gaze meaningfully over the disciples behind them.

Liubi dabbed the corner of her mouth with her handkerchief and traded glances with Yunsong. "What's so secretive that you can't tell anyone?"

Yunsong pondered it over for a moment before gesturing for the disciples to wait outside. Though Liubi was being sarcastic, she did as Yunsong had and dismissed the Liuyun Sect disciples. Zimo and the others took the hint and left too, though they stood at the entrance to keep an eye on the other sects.

Once the disciples from Qingyun Sect and Liuyun Sect had left, Tianlang erected a sound barrier that enveloped the entire hall. Yunsong's and the others' expressions grew solemn.

There were indeed many secrets that disciples weren't privy to. Only the elders had the qualifications to know. As such, Mo Tianliao, who'd insisted on staying, stood out like a sore thumb. Yunsong glared at him.

Tianlang waved his hand nonchalantly. "It's fine. All the personal disciples in Woyun Sect know this secret." No sooner had he said that than Yanlie appeared beside him and refilled his tea.

Yunsong felt like he'd been played. He released his divine sense, detecting two more people in the rear hall. His expression darkened. Originally, the three of them had been evenly matched with the three soul transformation cultivators from Woyun Sect in the hall. But now there were Yanlie and Mo Tianliao—two nascent soul cultivators—and two core formation cultivators in the rear. If they came to blows, they would be on the losing side.

Yunyuan wasn't concerned, though. She soothed her senior, telling him not to fret. They were on someone else's turf. If Tianlang wanted to deal with them, he didn't need to go to all this trouble. Her senior was simply being paranoid.

"So, what's the secret?" Liubi couldn't hold it in anymore.

“As everyone knows, the soul beasts from Woyun Sect have always been stronger.” Tianlang-zhenren sipped his tea. “I don’t mean for soothing inner demons, but in battles.”

Yunyuan nodded. That was true; she’d been able to tell during the grand summit. Soul beasts were usually used to soothe inner demons, but they could also assist in battle. She remembered the disciple named Bailuo. During combat, his opponent had suddenly summoned his soul beast, a golden python. Bailuo had had no choice but to unleash his soul beast, a purple marten that bit the golden python right on its vital spot on its first try.

“This is Woyun Sect’s closely guarded secret art.” Tianlang-zhenren sighed again.

At the mention of “closely guarded secret art,” Yunsong and the others pricked up their ears.

The corners of Mo Tianliao’s lips twitched as he lowered his head to focus on slicing spiritual fruits for his master.

According to Tianlang-zhenren, Woyun Sect had a secret beast-taming method that was only passed on to personal disciples. This method seemed to allow unbonded spirit beasts to communicate with humans, who would then impart cultivation techniques to the spirit beast, enabling them to cultivate by themselves. Once they evolved, they would then sign the blood pact with the cultivators.

The higher the spirit beast’s cultivation, the higher its selling price, and evolved spirit beasts commanded astronomical rates. That was because the later the pact was signed, the stronger the soul beast would be. After all, a house cat could never compare to a wild tiger.

Cultivators usually rushed to form a blood pact as soon as they got a spirit beast because they were worried someone else would steal it away. On top of that, an unbonded spirit beast couldn’t communicate with humans, and their inability to obtain suitable cultivation methods meant that their cultivation was slow. If they were to slowly raise these spirit beasts, it could take an age for them to catch up to their masters’ cultivation levels.

“Really?” Liubi’s eyes lit up. Her sect had been raising spirit beasts all this time. If they could obtain this beast-taming method and raise all the

unbonded spirit beasts until they evolved, then the number of spiritual stones they earned would be…

“But there’s a catch.” Tianlang didn’t have to look at them to know what they were thinking. After a pause, he went on: “To tame beasts this way, the cultivators must not have previously formed a blood pact with any other spirit beast. And they have to have a very close relationship with their spirit beasts, eating and living with them.”

Understanding dawned on them. No wonder Qingtong had taken the tiger as his disciple and kept him by his side—that’d been a cover for their overly close relationship.

Liubi deflated in disappointment. According to Tianlang, a cultivator could only raise one spirit beast using this secret art, and they had to sign a blood pact with this same beast. To her sect, this method wasn’t very useful.

Displeased, Mo Tianliao grabbed Qingtong’s hand under the cover of his sleeve. His cat was his! And he certainly wasn’t eating and living together with some tiger!

Qingtong glared at him and turned his hand over to pinch Mo Tianliao’s palm, trying to tell him to behave himself, but Mo Tianliao clasped his hand around his finger and slowly slid up and down around it. *Insolent disciple, how dare he tease his shizun!*

The two engaged in a battle under the table, completely ignoring Tianlang’s tall tales.

“Oh, I remember now. My master mentioned this before,” Yunyuan suddenly recalled. Years ago, her master had vaguely hinted at something similar, but she hadn’t understood it then, so she’d dismissed it. Now that Tianlang explained it, it finally clicked.

The corners of Mo Tianliao’s lips twitched. So, this wasn’t the first time this lie had been told; they had deceived generation after generation of fellow cultivators.

“So, Sect Leader Tianlang’s soul companion is still unbonded?” Yunsong was still skeptical. They all knew that Tianlang-zhenren’s soul companion was a wolf who rarely showed his face.

Tianlang sighed. “Truth be told, that soul companion of mine is unbonded too. I didn’t dare to show him to others before because of his young age, but now, he’s already evolved.”

A youth in a black-and-white cultivator robe with stern, hard features walked out from the rear hall. He appeared about fifteen or sixteen in mortal years. He cupped his hands in greeting at the others, but didn’t wait for a response before going over to stand expressionlessly beside Tianlang.

Mo Tianliao studied the youth. If he wasn’t wrong, this was Langzi, Tianlang-zhenren’s youngest disciple and son. The sect leader couldn’t possibly be planning to pass his son off as his soul companion, could he?

Sure enough, Tianlang said, “This is my soul companion.” He gestured for Langzi to show everyone his original form.

The youth expressionlessly turned to look at his undependable father and then looked away, completely ignoring him. Tianlang was speechless.

“This boy hasn’t signed a blood pact yet?” Liubi stood up in astonishment and reached out to touch the youth’s face. He dodged her, his ink-black pupils turning eerie green as he glared menacingly at her. Startled, she instinctively moved to attack.

“What are you doing?!” Tianlang pushed her away with a wave of his hand and pulled his son over. Langzi shook off his father’s hand and jumped to the side.

“These wild ones are really tough to tame,” Yunyuan lamented.

Yunsong shook his head at how fierce Langzi seemed. “Seeing how ferocious this unbonded beast is, I have to say Woyun Sect’s method is more trouble than it’s worth.”

“You can make them obedient with the secret art.” Tianlang put on a show of making some gestures. Langzi slowly turned to look at his father, then he took two steps back and crouched down, turning into a small wolf pup.

“Wow!” Yunyuan exclaimed in amazement.

Mo Tianliao’s eyes lit up as he stared intently at the furry little pup with black-and-white fur. Two large, alert ears perked up on his round little head. His dark green eyes were round and wide in a glare similar to the one

on Langzi's face just now—but while it had appeared fierce on the cold-faced youth, on a furry little pup…

"Grrr—" The wolf pup growled threateningly at the fussing Yunyuan, baring a set of milk fangs at her.

"Unbonded beasts are prone to biting." Tianlang hurried over and picked up the wolf pup. "Moxiong, take your junior away."

The burly Moxiong thundered over, making the floor shake with each heavy step. "Yes, Shizun," he answered gruffly, and took the pup before thundering away.

Tianlang withdrew the barrier. The elders were still reeling from the "big secret" when a disciple from Woqing Sanctum hurried over and whispered into Mo Tianliao's ear. The hall was noisy, so no one could catch what was being said, but Qingtong-zhenren and Mo Tianliao stood up at once and headed straight outside. Yunsong frowned and motioned for a couple of disciples to follow them and see what was happening.

The disciple had reported that they'd found the tiger on Qingyun Sect's vessel. When the Qingyun sect disciples saw Qingtong and Mo Tianliao flying toward the rope bridge, they sensed trouble. One doubled back to inform the elders, while the others continued to follow.

The rope bridge was one and a half miles long, and sword-riding was impossible. But Qingtong was a soul transformation cultivator who could ride the wind, and he simply floated across. Mo Tianliao, long accustomed to the bridge, ran swiftly across the rope as if he were on flat ground, occasionally even leaping forward with bursts of energy. The disciples from Qingyun Sect weren't nearly as adept, and they inched carefully along the rope bridge with their hearts in their mouths.

After shaking off the Qingyun Sect disciples, Qingtong and Mo Tianliao arrived at the spot where the flying ship was moored.

"Who goes th—" Before the Qingyun Sect disciples guarding the vessel could finish speaking, Qingtong knocked them out with a palm strike. These were merely foundation establishment cultivators—they posed no challenge at all for Qingtong.

"Shishu, Shizu!" Suheng scuttled out from a corner. "Shifu is in the stone chamber over there, but the spell array is too powerful for me to get

close.”

The revelation that their master was a spirit beast had come so out of the blue that it had taken Suheng and the others a while to process it, but after being counseled by Yanlie, they’d finally come to terms with it. Be he human or spirit, he was still their master after all. Moreover, he was their grandmaster’s soul companion, so it was still within reason for him to teach them. After all, they’d recently found out that the Demon Lord Shidi’s demonic companion also had the power to command his subordinates.

Mo Tianliao nodded and pulled Qingtong toward the small building. Just as they neared the door, they heard Menghu’s voice: “Miss, physical contact between men and women is inappropriate. I’ll never agree to it!”

“Halt!” Two core formation cultivators were standing guard at the entrance.

“Move if you don’t want to die,” Qingtong said, narrowing his eyes, but he made no move to attack.

“Greetings, Zhenren.” The two cultivators immediately bowed in greeting when they saw this great master at the soul transformation stage. They weren’t going to fight a hopeless battle. Qingtong waved them away, and they promptly fled to inform the Qingyun Sect elders.

“Don’t come any closer! Stay where you are!” Menghu cowered in the corner. The spell array in this room was specifically targeted at spirit beasts to suppress their cultivation. A muscular black-and-yellow striped tigress circled him, waiting for her chance to pounce. Unable to put up with it anymore, Menghu transformed into a giant tiger and knocked the tigress over with a paw.

Far from being angry, the tigress rolled onto her back in submission. The tiger let go of her at once and cowered back against the wall, but the tigress followed him and rubbed her tail against his face. The face buried under Menghu’s fur promptly turned green.

Mo Tianliao burst out laughing.

Menghu whipped his head up at the sound of Mo Tianliao’s voice. He bounded to the door and turned into his human form, looking miserable. “Shizun, save me!”

The array in the stone chamber was quite ingenious. The outer layer was an alarm array that would immediately notify Yunsong and the others when it was triggered, while the inner layer was a trapping array specifically designed to suppress spirit beasts' cultivation. Although it was clever, it wouldn't pose any problem for Mo Tianliao to break the spell array without alerting Yunsong, though it would take some time.

"That old crook Yunsong must already know you're here, so why bother taking your time?" Menghu clung to the metal bars of the door with a distressed look as the tigress behind him rubbed her body vigorously against his thigh.

Mo Tianliao pressed a fist to his lips and chuckled. "Why the rush to get out? Such a rare romantic encounter…"

Suheng looked at his master, his face red from struggling to hold his laughter in.

"Bastard! Can't you see how hideous this tigress is?" Menghu cursed.

Seeming to understand what he'd said, the tigress roared at him. Mo Tianliao looked at the furry-faced tigress. How was he supposed to tell if she was pretty or ugly? To him, all tigers looked the same.

Menghu was still swearing when a crisp crack rang out as the iron bars he was shaking broke. He tumbled out and fell to the ground. While Mo Tianliao had been teasing him, he'd already taken the direct approach and broken the array with brute force.

Before Menghu could scramble to his feet, Yunsong and Yunyuan arrived.

"Qingtong-zhenren, what do you mean by trespassing on our flying ship?" Yunsong erected a barrier with a wave of his hand to prevent the tigress inside from escaping.

Qingtong ignored him and picked up Menghu to take him away.

"Stop right there!" Yunsong held out a hand to stop them, but Yunyuan held him back.

"Shixiong, this tiger is his to begin with, so there's nothing wrong with him taking him away." Yunyuan turned to Qingtong with a smile.

“This tigress has excellent aptitude. Since your tiger is even unbonded, would you consider…a matrimonial union?” Yunyuan blushed.

“What a strange way to put it, Yunyuan-zhenren,” said Mo Tianliao, smiling faintly. “Someone who didn’t know better might think you’re the one looking to mate.”

“You…” The orthodox sects always put elegance and reputation above all, so Yunyuan had never heard such crude words before. Her face flushed red and white, so angry that she couldn’t speak. Aggrieved, she looked at Qingtong, her eyes glistening wetly.

“My tiger has the bloodline of a divine beast,” Qingtong said flatly. “His breeding services cost thirty thousand high-grade spiritual stones.” Thirty thousand high-grade spiritual stones was much more expensive than the asking prices for premium breeding beasts in the black market.

Ignoring the two infuriated Qingyun Sect elders, Qingtong led his disciples and grand-disciple back to Woqing Sanctum.

Since the guests had come from far away, Woyun Sect naturally had to play host. The departure date for the demon palace was scheduled for the third day of the next month, which left several days for Mo Tianliao to settle affairs at Woqing Sanctum.

With Menghu’s identity exposed, some disciples couldn’t accept the fact that their master was a spirit beast, so Mo Tianliao dismissed them and sent them to the Blessed Sanctuary of a Thousand Sprouts to be ordinary inner disciples. Some didn’t want to go, so they feigned respect for Menghu, but they couldn’t escape the eyes of an old fox like Mo Tianliao who had centuries of experience reading people. He saw through them at a glance.

After he was done sifting through the disciples, there were fewer than ten second-generation disciples left in Woqing Sanctum, which made the place much quieter.

Qingtong sat in his gently creaking rocking chair as he slowly munched on the Jadefruit Mo Tianliao had sliced for him. The tiger lay listlessly on the ground. Seeing how dispirited he looked, Qingtong threw a slice of Jadefruit to him. The tiger didn’t even get up when he the

translucent fruit landed before him; instead, he lazily tilted his head and scooped it into his mouth with his tongue.

Mo Tianliao looked at him in amusement. “Did that tigress break your heart or something?” Then, remembering something, he pulled Qingtong’s wrist over and let out the little female fox. Earlier at the gates, he’d told Shuangren to go in by himself, but since no one in the sect knew Shuanghua, she’d remained in Qingtong’s inventory bracelet.

The fox shook out her flattened fur and looked fearfully at the tiger.

“Eldest Shixiong, here’s a pretty girl for you to feast your eyes on,” Mo Tianliao teased.

Qingtong finished the plate of Jadefruit. Turning into a snow-white cat, he leaped onto the tiger’s back, stretched lazily, and lay down on his fur.

The tiger glanced at the little fox and then averted his eyes. She wasn’t a tiger. How was he supposed to tell if her furry face was pretty or ugly?

“She’s a real beauty, though Chubby can’t tell,” said Yanlie from the bamboo grove. The head disciple of the sect leader walked over with a smile, dressed in a wide-sleeved robe in vivid red. Behind him, the burly Moxiong and an expressionless Langzi followed.

“Greetings, Shishu.” Moxiong and Langzi bowed in unison. They were supposed to have come and paid their respects to their elders on their return to the sect, but Qingtong hadn’t been around, and then Menghu had been captured when he finally came back. That was why they’d only come to pay their respects now.

“Meow,” Qingtong responded, waving a paw for them to dispense with formalities.

Since their elder was now in his miniature form, it would be improper of them to stand over him and talk, so Moxiong crouched down while Langzi transformed into a wolf pup, blinking his dark green eyes as he looked curiously at Qingtong.

“Langzi, this is our little shishu,” Moxiong said to the wolf pup with a smile. “You met him when you were just a kid.”

The little wolf circled the cat. His gaze was still as piercing as it had been in his human form, although his tail wagged happily. The cat lazily patted the wolf pup on his doggy head. The pup stopped circling, propped himself up on the tiger, and leaned his little pink nose in to sniff him.

The usually bad-tempered cat was surprisingly patient with the wolf pup. Instead of scratching him, he slowly leaned over and licked the little wolf pup on his head.

Chapter 84:
Disciple Swap

“AWOO?” THE LITTLE WOLF PUP stiffened for a moment, then wagged his tail even more merrily and stuck his tongue out to lick him back.

Mo Tianliao’s face darkened. He grabbed the lazily lounging cat and held him in his arms. Even if this wolf pup looked like a baby, he was already of marriageable age in his human form! It was one thing for his cat to lick others, but the nerve of this wolf pup to lick back!

The wolf pup licked at empty air and ended up with a mouthful of tiger fur.

The tiger turned to look at the little furball on his face. With a tilt of his head, he leaned in to lick him back. His huge tongue swept over the wolf pup’s little head, flipping over one perked ear and making him look quite comical.

The wolf pup shook his head unhappily. His ear was still damp with the tiger’s saliva. Glaring at the tiger, who was still trying for another lick, he crouched low and suddenly sprang up to chomp down on the tiger’s ear.

“Ow!” the tiger howled, but he stayed where he was, tilting his head to try and protect his ear.

Moxiong, finding this amusing, slapped the tiger on the backside and grinned. “Long time no see, Menghu. Aren’t you going to say hello?”

Now angry, the tiger leaped up with the wolf pup still dangling from his ear and tackled Moxiong to the ground.

“Want a fight, huh?” Moxiong bared his teeth and rolled over, turning into a giant black bear. He hoisted the tiger over his shoulder, while the tiger swiped at the black bear’s tail with his claw.

In the midst of all this, the wolf pup was flung off. Yanlie nimbly caught him and took him back to the pavilion, away from the two avid brawlers.

Qingtong jumped down from Mo Tianliao's arms and transformed into his human form. He settled back into his rocking chair and waved his hand at Yanlie and the others to dismiss them. Meanwhile, Shuangren, who had gone to fetch water, heard the commotion and came over carrying a water jar. The little fox sitting helplessly on the ground promptly bounded over and jumped onto his shoulder.

"Did you take in another fox, Shishu?" Yanlie's brows creased into a slight frown as he looked at the fox on Shuangren's shoulder. Shuangren had been registered as Qingtong's disciple primarily to alleviate his headaches for him. In truth, it was kind of a stretch for him to be Qingtong's personal disciple given his aptitude and species. And now there was another fox…

Mo Tianliao took the water jar from Shuangren and poured the mountain spring water into the teapot. He rubbed his fingers, lighting the charcoal under the tea stand. "Shizun's divine soul is much better now," he said, signaling to Yanlie with his eyes.

Yanlie caught on. "I was wondering how your cultivation reached the nascent soul stage so quickly. You must've been having some extraordinary encounters lately."

Mo Tianliao poured the tea into the cold jade cup and tested the temperature before handing it to Qingtong. "There's no hiding from you, Shixiong. But my cultivation isn't important. What matters is that I learned a technique that can heal my shizun's soul." With a smile in his eyes, he looked at his master, who was sampling the tea. Qingtong choked on it.

Mo Tianliao quickly patted his back. The wolf pup jumped out of Yanlie's arms and pressed up against Qingtong's knees, peering up at him curiously.

"I see." Yanlie smiled and looked at the two foxes standing off to the side. "In that case, let's go by the rules and put them under my tutelage."

Foxes were fairly common among the spirit beasts in the cultivation world. Woyun Sect had many foxes, and the sect leader dumped all of them on Yanlie to manage. Everyone from Woyun Sect was used to it by now. Whenever they saw a fox, they would automatically assume it fell under Yanlie's jurisdiction.

Shuangren blinked, taken aback. He was currently the personal disciple of a sanctum-master. If he became Yanlie's disciple instead, wouldn't his status drop by a generation? Then again, Yanlie had been the one teaching him spellcraft all along, so it wouldn't be inappropriate to address him as Shifu…

Qingtong put down the cup and poked the little wolf pup in the head. The wolf pup promptly licked his finger.

Mo Tianliao pulled his hand away and wiped it carefully with a damp cloth. "The foxes can't learn much under Shizun, anyway. Shizun will recover quickly with me taking care of him. Let them follow Yanlie instead."

Qingtong looked at him and hummed noncommittally.

Exchanging a knowing look with Yanlie, Mo Tianliao contentedly sent the fox siblings away. From the very beginning, he'd found Shuangren an eyesore. The guy was constantly interrupting his intimate moments with his master, and now he'd even added another piece of excess baggage. Back at the crystal palace, Mo Tianliao had already been plotting to get rid of them.

"It's not impossible for you to stay in Woqing Sanctum with your aptitude, but your sister has to come with me," Yanlie said to the still-hesitating Shuangren. "If you're okay with that, then we'll do that."

Shuangren paused. His master had said the same thing back at the crystal palace. Yanlie's disciples were all foxes who lived together in a blessed sanctuary, led by Chifeng and his two siblings. He'd seen the trio before. His sister was so ignorant of worldly affairs, and he didn't feel comfortable letting her go alone. Pursing his lips, he raised his hem and kneeled before Qingtong.

"Shizun, I…"

His master was the one who'd rescued him from the demon lair, healed his wounds, and brought him back to the sect. Now that they were about to part, he had so much to say, but he didn't know where to start.

"Go." Qingtong waved him away before he could launch into an emotional farewell. "It's not like you're expelled from the sect. Just address me as Shishuzu when you see me in the future."[6]

Shuangren’s words died in his throat. That was true. They were still in the same sect. As long as Qingtong summoned him, he’d still have to come and serve as his pillow.

Yanlie led the two foxes away. As he walked past, he grabbed Moxiong—still on top of the tiger, wrestling with him—with a delicate hand and dragged him away.

The black bear flailed his four paws around. “Hey, I’m not done fighting!”

“Let’s not disturb Shishu.” Yanlie shot him a warning glare and turned to call Langzi, but the wolf pup clung to Qingtong’s legs, unwilling to leave. Qingtong pinched the wolf’s ears and waved to Yanlie, indicating that it was fine to let the pup stay and play for a while.

Yanlie smiled and left.

Mo Tianliao truly did admire the way Yanlie handled matters. It was no easy feat trying to satisfy everyone, but the kid was really good at reading people. Mo Tianliao smirked with satisfaction as he looked out at the now much quieter Woqing Sanctum.

Qingtong lifted the wolf pup onto his lap and fed him a piece of fruit. “Did you and Yanlie plan this?”

“No.” Mo Tianliao sheepishly touched his nose. He’d simply sent Yanlie a fire-attribute spiritual artifact and casually brought up the two foxes.

The tiger shook the dirt off his fur and flopped back into his original spot. The wolf pup promptly moved in to bite his swishing tail.

Not much later, Yanlie returned with a yowling leopard cub.

“Since I took Shishu’s disciple, I ought to make up for it,” he said with a smile.

The leopard cub, with his pretty spotted markings, was the very same one Mo Tianliao had rescued at the foot of the mountain. The little guy had been emaciated and weak and on the verge of death back then, but now he was plump and round, with sleek, glossy fur.

Yanlie didn’t have a choice either. Qingtong had thrown this leopard to the sect leader, who in turn had dumped the cub on him. Raising a

leopard in a den of foxes was really asking him to do the impossible. Despite the leopard's small size, his instinct was to pounce at any foxes he saw. The fur on Chifeng's tail had been yanked out more times than he could count. Eventually, there would come a time when the leopard grew up. Surely they couldn't expect it to keep digging for fruits and bugs with the foxes every day when that happened, could they?

Since Qingtong was on the road to recovery now, there was no need to worry about the cub being too noisy for him. It'd be best to hand it over to Woqing Sanctum.

"Raah!" The leopard spotted the tiger on the ground and struggled to go over.

Qingtong squinted and beckoned for Yanlie to bring the leopard cub to him.

The leopard crouched on Qingtong's lap and shrank its head back. Blinking its big, clear eyes, it leaned over to sniff him—no fox scent, just the warmth of sunshine and the faint, sweet scent of trees. The leopard cub loved the smell and burrowed into Qingtong's arms, nuzzling its head vigorously against him.

The little wolf pup wouldn't stand for this. He bit the leopard's tail and dragged it back. Shishu hadn't even held him in his arms yet. How could this kid beat him to it?

"Fair enough." Qingtong picked the leopard up to look at it. He poked its chubby little belly. "Let's call him Little Chubby, then."

Chapter 85:
Rocking Horse

“RAAOW!” THE LEOPARD CUB started struggling, clearly not a fan of this name.

With a twitch of his ears, the tiger lying on the ground sprang to his feet and padded over to his master to look at the cub. Finally, someone with a name as silly as his own, ha ha! The tiger was quite pleased; he liked this leopard cub more the more he looked at it.

Qingtong placed the leopard cub on the tiger’s head and sent them away to play together. The wolf pup coolly watched the tiger with the leopard cub on his head for a moment before trotting after them.

Yanlie discussed the various arrangements for the trip to the demon palace with Qingtong, including the attendees and necessary precautions. He also reminded Mo Tianliao to pick up his elixirs from Huaqing before leaving.

Under normal circumstances, it was impossible to tell if a spirit beast had signed a blood pact, but there was a type of Spiritual Blood Monkey that could quickly identify those who had. Menghu had only been discovered this time because someone in Liuyun Sect had had one of these monkeys. Huaqing had elixirs that could guard against them.

“This time, there will be cultivators from both the orthodox sects and the ten great demonic sects going. My shifu bade me to tell you not to act impulsively,” Yanlie added, still not feeling reassured.

Qingtong waved his understanding.

There was nothing else to do in the afternoon, so Mo Tianliao went to Woxuan Sanctum to get the elixirs from Huaqing.

Huaqing was in the apothecary, intently watching the elixir furnace.

The Spiritual Blood Monkey identified spirit beasts with its sensitive spirit soul. This kind of monkey wasn’t born naturally of the universe; instead, they were evil creatures that appeared only in places where a large

number of spirit beasts had died, feeding on their spirit souls for sustenance. A blood pact would dull the activity level of a spirit beast's divine soul, making it less appetizing to the monkeys. Unbonded spirit beasts, on the other hand, were a grand feast to them, so they would instinctively let out a screech when they saw one.

This type of monkey was extremely rare—there were fewer than five in the entire cultivation world.

"I've tried concocting these pills before, but I never succeeded." Huaqing stared into the flickering flames of the furnace. "I was still missing one medicinal herb."

"Which one?" Mo Tianliao was curious too. When he was a demon lord, he'd seen a Spiritual Blood Monkey once. The thing had been hideous, with bald patches in its fur, and it had screeched noisily at the kitten in his arms. It had annoyed him, so he'd killed it with a concealed weapon.

The demonic cultivator it belonged to hadn't dared complain; he kept apologizing for disturbing the demon lord. Lord Duantian had an unbonded cat that was the apple of his eye—the whole demonic path knew that, and this monkey had actually had the nerve to want to eat the cat's spirit soul. Frankly, Duantian had shown mercy by not killing its owner along with it.

But Mo Tianliao's strength wasn't what it used to be, and he hadn't reclaimed his power and influence in the demonic path. For now, he couldn't afford causing any trouble by killing the monkeys directly, so these elixirs were necessary.

Huaqing took out a jade box—the same one that contained the Jadetree branch that Mo Tianliao had won at the Three Sects' Grand Summit. Already, a third of the branch in the jade box was gone.

"This is what I was missing." Huaqing peeled the bark back a little, exposing the white, gel-like substance underneath.

Mo Tianliao understood now. He collected a small elixir bottle from Huaqing. One of these pills could last for ten days, so this would be enough. He tossed the bottle into the inventory bracelet, but instead of leaving, he held his hand back out. "What about the soul-condensing pill in liquid form?"

“That’s tougher to concoct. I haven’t succeeded thus far.” Huaqing squatted on the ground, vexed. The fire always dried out all the water, leaving behind a solid pill. If he tried to control the heat to prevent the water from evaporating, then the elixir wouldn’t form at all.

Mo Tianliao thought for a moment. “I have an idea, but I’m not sure if it’ll work.”

“Oh?” Huaqing looked up at him expectantly. He’d come to realize that elixir concocting and artifact forging were indeed interconnected; Mo Tianliao’s insights had the potential to be useful to him.

“Well…” Mo Tianliao stroked his chin, making it clear he wasn’t going to tell him for free.

Huaqing pursed his lips. “You brat. What do you want now?”

Mo Tianliao grinned and leaned over. “The heaven-grade Nectar of Intimacy,” he said in hushed tones.

Huaqing’s eyes widened as he processed those words. He sized up Mo Tianliao. “Well, I’d never have guessed you like guys.”

“I didn’t know either.” Mo Tianliao shrugged. “Not until I felt the stirrings in my heart did I realize I like men.” Or, more precisely, just that one gorgeous man-slash-furball. It didn’t matter to Mo Tianliao if he was a man or a woman, a human or a spirit.

Huaqing didn’t fall for it. “The nectar is very expensive.”

Elixirists concocted other things besides elixirs to earn money, and Huaqing was no exception. The nectar was lucrative business, and Huaqing had made his fair share of it. Given his standard, most of what he crafted was heaven-grade.

Mo Tianliao smiled and removed a Jadefruit from his inventory bracelet.

“Eh! Master, that’s mine!” Taishi wailed in his consciousness. It was the last one he had stolen. All the others had been stored in Qingtong’s bracelet; only this one had been temporarily kept with his master.

Mo Tianliao ignored him and waved the Jadefruit before Huaqing. Huaqing’s eyes instinctively followed the fruit that seemed to be sculpted out of jade. “What if I trade this for it?” Mo Tianliao said.

“Deal!” Huaqing agreed immediately. The Jadefruit was exceedingly rare, and with this one alone, he could concoct three nascent soul elixirs. The sight of his shishu munching on it like a snack earlier at Liuyun Sect had been enough to break his heart.

Huaqing generously pulled out his own stock—three big bottles of heaven-grade Nectar of Intimacy in white jade bottles. Mo Tianliao opened one and sniffed it. The scent was faint, with a subtle, almost imperceptible fragrance, just like the one he’d gotten in Bahuang City.

“I was fortunate enough to get one from a demonic path auction house, and it was similar to this.” Mo Tianliao took out the white jade bottle that still had some nectar left.

Huaqing glanced at it. “I was the one who concocted that.” Or more precisely, most of the heaven-grade Nectar on the market came from Huaqing’s hand. Heaven-grade Nectar wasn’t easy to concoct, but for some reason, he was particularly adept at making it.

“Oh, what an honor to meet you at last!” said Mo Tianliao, making a show of cupping his hands in respect.

Huaqing returned the gesture with a chuckle. “You’re too kind!” He happily accepted the Jadefruit and asked Mo Tianliao for his thoughts on the liquid form of the soul-condensing pill.

“When you can’t figure something out, try thinking in reverse.” Mo Tianliao sat on the ground with Huaqing and took out a bunch of small, exquisitely carved jade bottles. Then he carefully poured the large bottle of nectar into each small bottle for convenience of use.

“In reverse?” Huaqing scratched his head.

“To concoct the soul-condensing pill in liquid form, you just need to keep it in liquid form. What if we soak pills that have already been concocted to dissolve them?” Mo Tianliao moved with precision, quickly transferring the contents of all three big bottles into the smaller ones without spilling a single drop.

“Why didn’t I think of that?!” Huaqing slapped Mo Tianliao on the shoulder, visibly excited. He’d been so fixated on preventing the water from evaporating during concocting that he hadn’t thought to simply add water *after* they were made.

Mo Tianliao nearly dropped the bottles he was holding in his hand. He quickly put them away.

“But the soul-condensing pill must be consumed once it’s dissolved, or it will lose efficacy,” Huaqing said with a frown. “To preserve it, we’ll need to add a substance that can maintain a liquid form while benefiting the divine soul.” He scanned the room, finally stopping on the jade box that contained the Jadefruit.

Mo Tianliao pressed his fist to his lips, suppressing his smile. He patted Huaqing on the shoulder. “Well then, take your time thinking it over. I’ll take my leave.”

Huaqing’s heart was still bleeding after Mo Tianliao slipped away. When boiled to a liquid, the Jadefruit could form a gel-like consistency that wouldn’t dry or break up. In addition, it was beneficial to the divine soul. It was the perfect choice, but…he’d only just gotten the Jadefruit from Mo Tianliao, and now he had to use it to concoct an elixir for him. Something was definitely off here…

***

THE PEOPLE FROM Qingyun Sect and Liuyun Sect had been put up in a separate blessed sanctuary and forbidden from getting close to the three sanctums, so Woqing Sanctum was quiet and peaceful.

It was late by the time Mo Tianliao returned. Menghu, having finished teaching the disciples their evening lessons, was crouching in front of Qingning Palace with the leopard cub on his head. When he saw Mo Tianliao, he stood up.

“Shidi, you’re finally back.” Menghu took down the cub and held it in his arms. “Come on, let’s go have a drink.”

Mo Tianliao scratched the furry head resting against his senior’s chest. “Where’s Shizun?”

Menghu made a hushing gesture. “Inside.”

Mo Tianliao walked in to find Qingtong asleep on the plush couch. Fortunately, the attendants had covered him with a blanket. He picked him up, intending to carry him inside. Qingtong, not yet fully asleep, opened his eyes a slit and yawned.

“I’m going drinking with Shixiong. Go back to sleep, Shizun,” Mo Tianliao whispered in his ear.

A flash of white light, and the gorgeous man in his arms vanished. In his place, a snow-white ball of fur clung to his clothes. His meaning was clear: He wanted to go too.

Mo Tianliao laughed in spite of himself. He cupped the cat’s backside to help him climb into his collar and walked out with him tucked safely inside.

“Everything’s okay with Shizun?” Menghu asked. The leopard, who had climbed back onto Menghu’s head, looked back at him with wide, round eyes.

“Yeah.” Mo Tianliao mumbled a reply and followed Menghu to the back mountain.

Menghu dug out a wine jar from under a tree and cradled it like a treasure. “I buried this fifty years ago.”

Mo Tianliao cleaned up the deer he’d just caught and grilled it over the fire. The deer was heavy, and he couldn’t find a suitable branch, so he used Taishi as a makeshift skewer. Taishi could turn into a long, thin fork, convenient for stringing together many pieces of meat in rows.

Menghu took a bite of the meat and clinked cups with Mo Tianliao. “Is Shizun’s divine soul really healed?”

“No.” Mo Tianliao took a sip. The sweet, refreshingly cool wine flowed down his throat. He sighed softly. “Shizun’s divine soul is too severely damaged. The technique I learned can heal it, but it’ll take repeated use over a long time to see the effects.”

The cat sleeping against Mo Tianliao’s chest rolled over, pressing his warm belly against Mo Tianliao’s abdomen.

“Then you need to keep at it every day to heal Shizun,” Menghu replied seriously as he fed the leopard cub a piece of meat. “Is this

technique harmful to you?”

“Not really.” Mo Tianliao took another sip. “Just some blood essence. Nothing serious, though.”

Menghu frowned. “That isn’t something to take lightly.”

“I can replenish it by eating some venison.” Mo Tianliao gave him an enigmatic smile.

“Huh?” Menghu scratched his head. Blood essence was the essence of a cultivator’s cultivation. How could eating venison replenish it?

Hearing this, the cat gave Mo Tianliao a scratch.

The two fellow disciples ate, drank, and chatted about recent events, enjoying themselves until the moon was high in the sky. Then they swayed to their feet.

“Let’s go back to the courtyard, Shidi.” Menghu put a hand on Mo Tianliao’s shoulder and pulled him toward the courtyard.

Mo Tianliao sent Menghu back to the courtyard before turning toward Qingning Palace.

Menghu stopped him when he saw the direction Mo Tianliao was heading. “Where are you going?”

“To keep Shizun company,” Mo Tianliao answered honestly, not intending to hide it.

Menghu shook his head vigorously like a rattle drum. “No!” Their master shouldn’t be disturbed in his sleep.

“Shizun likes me to be his mattress now,” Mo Tianliao said proudly.

Menghu’s eyes widened. His junior was a tree spirit with no fur. How could their master possibly like using him as a mattress?

“You wouldn’t understand,” Mo Tianliao said in all seriousness. “I can also be a blanket, a bench, or a rocking horse. Shizun loves it.”

A rocking horse? Menghu’s eyes widened. Did their master still like playing with rocking horses? As he watched his junior’s figure disappear into the night, he felt a twinge of sympathy.

Little did the complacent Mo Tianliao realize that the cat nestled against his bosom had silently extended his sharp, glinting claws.

MINI EXTRA

Woozy Sect Justice Online

Reporter Tiger: The crime scene is littered with wood shavings everywhere. Truly a tragic sight.

Witness Little Chubby: Ra-ah.

Reporter Tiger: Any comment from the victim?

Woodworker: QAQ Bragging’s all fun and games until the wood shavings go a-flyin’.

Chapter 86:
Bloom

MO TIANLIAO WAS GIVEN a thorough beating as soon as they returned to Qingning Palace. Resigned to putting himself at the mercy of his master, he hugged his head for cover and buried his face—now decorated with scratches—into the blanket, leaving only his butt sticking up.

Qingtong leaned against the headboard. Out of habit, he stretched out his long, slender hand to lick it, only to pause—there were wood splinters under his nails, but without fur on his fair-as-jade hand, he couldn't lick it.

A big head leaned in, squeezing itself between Qingtong's chest and elbow. "Are your hands dirty? Let's take a bath, then."

Qingtong looked down at him, opened his mouth—and bit!

"Yeeeouch!" Even with his ear bitten, Mo Tianliao persistently carried his beloved cat off to the bath.

Sitting in the bath, Mo Tianliao held the gorgeous, naked man in his arms. As he gently scrubbed him, he conjured forth a tiny green sprout at his fingertip for Qingtong to play with.

Qingtong poked at the tiny sprout with a slender finger. "Can you make it bloom?"

"The Undying Tree usually doesn't bloom." Mo Tianliao rested his chin on Qingtong's smooth shoulder and nuzzled against his elegant neck. "But I can."

"Show me!" Qingtong poked his hand, curious.

"Uh, flowers don't simply bloom." Mo Tianliao wrapped his arm around Qingtong's waist and pulled him closer into his embrace. "They need some outside help."

"Hm?" Qingtong didn't understand. What outside help did blooming need?

Mo Tianliao took one of Qingtong's fair ears into his mouth and licked it. His large hands wandered underwater, misbehaving.

Qingtong shifted, trying to pull his ear free, but when Mo Tianliao touched somewhere sensitive, he let out a soft moan and went limp in Mo Tianliao's arms.

Skin pressed against skin. Mo Tianliao's mouth was parched with desire. He licked away the water droplets from Qingtong's ear to his cheek and finally made his way to those soft, thin lips.

"Look, baby, it's blooming," Mo Tianliao whispered in Qingtong's ear.

Qingtong turned and saw a tiny bud emerging from the sprout on Mo Tianliao's fingertip. The shape it unfurled into was simple and not particularly showy, but the petals were a rare hue of ink-black.

"The Undying Tree is burned year after year. These black flowers simply can't survive. That's why they never bloom," Mo Tianliao murmured, his breath coming faster as he slowly lifted Qingtong's soft, round ass.

"I see—ah—" Qingtong was caught off guard as Mo Tianliao entered him, and he arched his neck back at the sudden pain.

Mo Tianliao bit down on his bobbing throat. "You made the tree bloom, so now you'll need to make it bear fruit."

"Mm…" Qingtong couldn't speak, so he tried to hit him, but alas, he couldn't reach Mo Tianliao when he was sitting with his back to him like this.

Within the dantian, the blossoming sprout wrapped around the little cat that attempted to escape, blooming flower after flower.

***

THE NEXT DAY, QINGTONG didn't manage to get out of bed, although Mo Tianliao was refreshed and energized. He tucked the covers

around his sleeping cat and tiptoed out.

“Shidi, where are you going?” Menghu, who had come for his morning greetings, bumped right into him.

“A-rah!” greeted the leopard cub from atop the tiger’s head.

“Shizun’s still sleeping. Don’t wake him up.” Mo Tianliao pulled the two silly guys out of the building with him. “I’m going to look for Huaqing.”

“Perfect. I’m going too.” Menghu’s eyes lit up. He lifted the leopard cub down and shoved it at Mo Tianliao. “Hold this for a while. My neck’s sore.”

Mo Tianliao looked down at the leopard cub—it was heavier than his shizun. No wonder Menghu’s neck was sore.

***

OVER IN THE FLOWER VALLEY, Huaqing was staring with bloodshot eyes at something in a jade bowl.

Dissolving and merging a liquefied soul-condensing pill into Jadefruit that had been refined into a gelatinous form did indeed work, but…the precious Jadefruit he had only just gotten his hands on was gone… just like that.

“Hua-shixiong truly lives up to his reputation as the number one elixirist of the orthodox path!” Mo Tianliao beamed as he reached for the jade bowl, but Huaqing grabbed it away.

“No!” Huaqing finally snapped out of it. “You brat, you said you’d give me the Jadefruit, but in the end, it was used for your own stuff!”

Mo Tianliao pressed a fist to his lips and cleared his throat. “I was sincere in giving you the Jadefruit, but you selflessly used it on my medicine, and it’d be ungracious of me not to accept your kindness. To make it up to you, I have—”

Huaqing’s eyes lit up. “More Jadefruits?”

“No,” Mo Tianliao said flatly. “However, I have these, if you don’t mind…” He fished out a handful of jade-white fruit pits from his inventory bracelet. Mo Tianliao usually sliced the Jadefruits Qingtong ate into tiny strips, removing all the pits and stems. Since these were nature’s treasures too, he hadn’t thrown them away.

“Not at all, not at all!” Huaqing excitedly held the pits with both hands. The pit of the Jadefruit, like its flesh, was a precious material that could also be refined into nascent soul elixirs. With this many, he could concoct countless pills.

Mo Tianliao seized his chance to grab the bowl and poured its contents into a jade bottle.

“Huaqing, are you still going to the demon palace?” Menghu patted the thrilled elixirist.

Huaqing stumbled from the force of it and waved impatiently. “Nah!” Who cared about the demon palace? He had elixirs to concoct! Besides, Lord Duantian was an artificer. Huaqing had no interest in Duantian’s demon palace.

Menghu continued patting him. “Let me use your token, then.”

Huaqing tossed his token to Menghu, then chased them off like they were flies. Informing the sect not to bother him unless absolutely necessary, he sealed off the apothecary.

Mo Tianliao arched an eyebrow at Menghu. “Are you going too?”

“I have to, since everyone knows I’m Shizun’s soul companion now.” Menghu scratched his head. For his own safety, he’d have to claim to the cultivation world that he had already signed a blood pact with his master.

***

SOON, THE DAY OF departure arrived. Each sect had their own standard flying ships.

As Qingtong was going, Yuli refused to go this time. Bailuo begged off too, saying the grass in the demon realm tasted horrible, and since he wasn't going, Zimo opted out as well. In the end, the only ones who were going were from Woqing Sanctum.

Xuanji didn't want to go either, but the sect leader gave him a kick. "Didn't you see that Qingyun Sect has two elders? What if they bully Tongtong?"

Xuanji had no choice but to go.

Qingtong looked at Woyun Sect's flying ship with disdain, not at all inclined to board it. It was a long journey from Woyun Sect to Duantian's demon palace, and he wasn't keen on spending his days on the boring ship. He turned to look at Mo Tianliao.

Only Mo Tianliao could read the meaning in those cold, beautiful eyes, and that imperious yet slightly petulant look made his knees weak. Qingtong would get whatever he wanted. Mo Tianliao promptly released the crystal palace. "Shizun, let's take this one instead."

MINI EXTRA

Everything in the Demon Palace is Good Stuff

Cultivator A: Wow! Ice-element spiritual fish!

Pawpaw: My snacks!

Cultivator B: Wow! A ten-thousand-year-old Fusang tree!

Pawpaw: My scratching post!

Cultivator C: Wow! Supreme-grade Oceansoul Sand!

Pawpaw: My kitty litter!

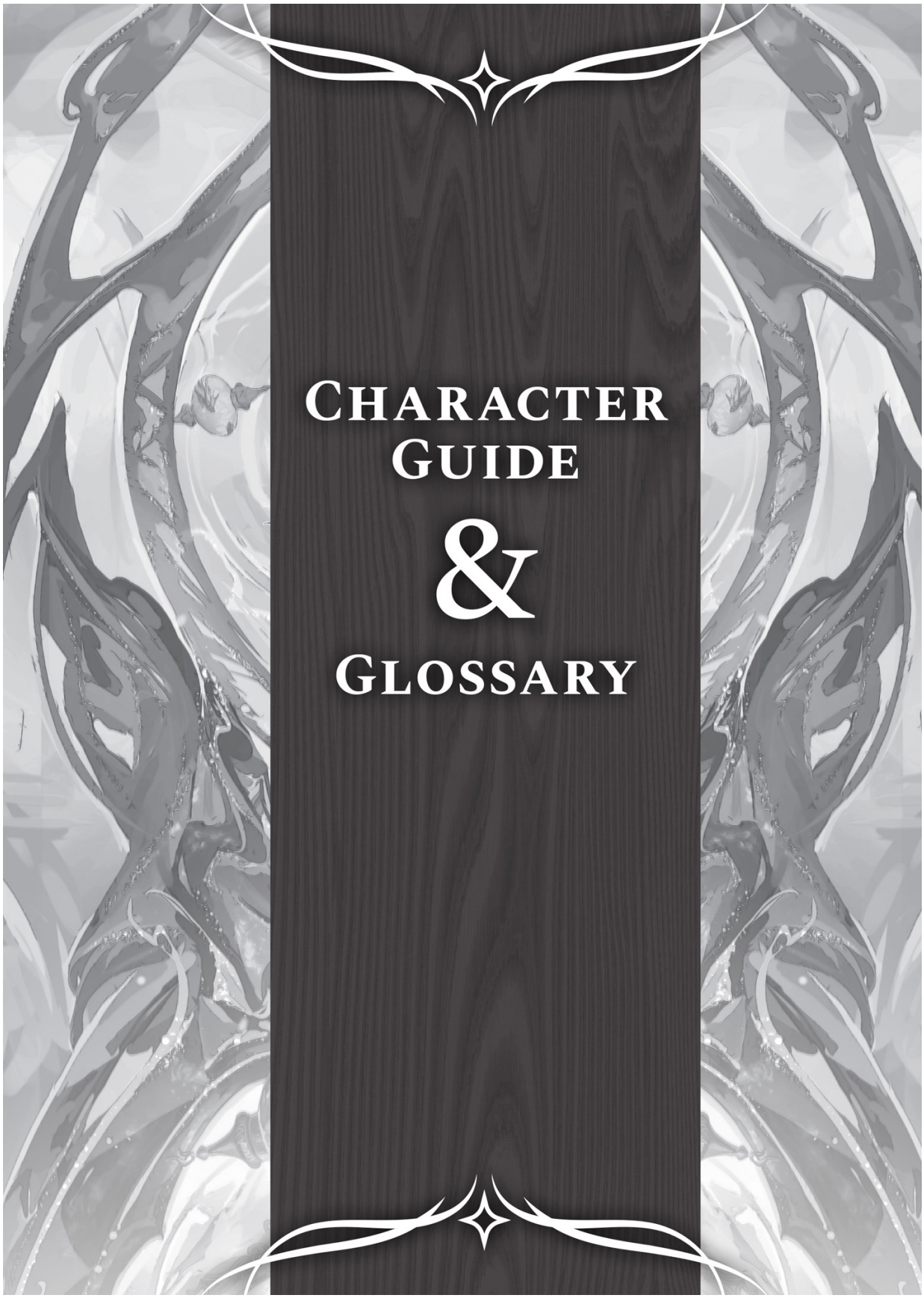
Cultivator D: Wow! There are even crystals in the sand!

Pawpaw: …My poop!

THE STORY CONTINUES IN

The White Cat's Divine Scratching Post

VOLUME 3



Character Guide & Glossary

CHARACTERS

MAIN CHARACTERS

MO TIANLIAO 莫天寥: A master artificer known as the Venerable Demon Lord Duantian in his previous life. Now reborn in the body of a… divine tree.

QINGTONG 清潼: One of the three sanctum-masters of Woyun Sect, and the human form of Mo Tianliao's cat, Pawpaw.

SUPPORTING CHARACTERS

WOYUN SECT

TIANLANG 天琅: Sect leader and one of the three sanctum-masters of Woyun Sect. A wolf.

XUANJI 玄机: One of the three sanctum-masters of Woyun Sect. A Xuanwu.

MENGHU 孟虎: Chief disciple under the tutelage of Qingtong, and a tiger. Qingtong's nickname for him is Chubby. (大胖).

YANLIE 炎烈: Chief disciple under the tutelage of the sect leader. A Flamefox.

ZIMO 紫陌: Second disciple under the tutelage of the sect leader. A marten.

BAILUO 白落: Third disciple under the tutelage of the sect leader. A rabbit.

MOXIONG 墨雄: Fourth disciple under the tutelage of the sect leader. A bear.

LANGZI 琅梓: Ffith disciple under the tutelage of the sect leader, and the sect leader's son.

YUANHAI 元海: Chief disciple under the tutelage of Xuanji. A sea turtle.

HUAQING 花情: Second disciple under the tutelage of Xuanji. Known as the Flaming Flower Elixirist. A butterfly.

YULI 玉离: Third disciple under the tutelage of Xuanji. A fish.

CHENG XI 程溪: A newly accepted disciple from the same batch as Mo Tianliao, with no formal title or rank as yet.

SUHENG 素恒: Second-generation disciple of Menghu.

CHIFENG 赤峰: Second-generation disciple; head disciple of Yanlie. A fox.

SHUANGREN 霜刃: a Soul-Soothing Frostfox who escaped from an auction house. He first follows Qingtong as his youngest disciple, but later takes Yanlie as his master.

SHUANGHUA 霜华: Shuangren's younger sister.

CHUBBY JUNIOR 小胖: A leopard cub.

LIUYUN SECT

LIUMANG 流茫: Sect leader of Liuyun sect.

LIUBI 流碧: A sect elder.

ELDER QIU 秋长老: Elder in charge of sect affairs; second only to the sect leader.

DING HU 丁户: Elder Ding; specializes in artifact forging.

DING ZIJIN 丁子金: Eldest son and heir of Elder Ding. Also specializes in artifacts.

DING ZIYU 丁子玉: Ding Zijin's half-brother, born to a concubine. Was once sent as a gift to Mo Tianliao.

QINYUN SECT

YUNSONG 云松: A sect elder.

YUNYUAN 云鸢: Yunsong's younger fellow disciple. She has the hots for Qingtong.

SHIDI 弑地: Nicknamed Dachui or Big Hammer (大锤). One of the demon lords of the unorthodox path. His name means “Earthslayer.”

BLACK NIGHTMARE LION 黑魇狮: Shidi’s soul beast. Nightmare for short.

MINGYAN 溟湮: The highest-ranked, most powerful demon lord.

XIANG 翔: A demonic cultivator who took Mo Tianliao’s position as second most powerful demon lord when he died.

NAME GUIDE

Names, Honorifics, and Titles

Diminutives, Nicknames, and Name Tags

A-: Friendly diminutive. Always a prefix. Usually for monosyllabic names, or one syllable out of a two-syllable name.

Doubling: Doubling a syllable of a person’s name can be a nickname, e.g., “Mangmang”; it has childish or cutesy connotations.

DA-: A prefix meaning “big” or “elder,” which can be added before titles for elders, like “dage” or “dajie,” or before a name.

LAO-: A prefix meaning “old.” Usually added to a surname and used in informal contexts.

XIAO-: A prefix meaning “little” or “younger,” which can be added before names or titles for juniors like “xiaodi.” Often used in an affectionate and familiar context.

-ER: An affectionate diminutive added to names, literally “son” or “child.” Always a suffix. Can sometimes be a fixed part of a person’s name, rather than just an affectionate suffix.

Family

DI/DIDI: Younger brother or a younger male friend.

GE/GEGE: A word meaning “elder brother.” It can also be used to address an unrelated male peer, and optionally used as a suffix.

JIE/JIEJIE: A word meaning “elder sister.” It can also be used to address an unrelated female peer, and optionally used as a suffix.

XIONG: A word meaning “elder brother.” It can be attached as a suffix to address an unrelated male peer.

Martial Arts and Tutelage

SHIBO: The elder male fellow disciple of one’s teacher.

SHIFU: Teacher or master. Literal meaning is “martial father.” For one’s master in one’s own sect.

SHISHU: Martial uncle. For junior martial siblings of the speaker’s master, including women.

SHIZHI: Martial nephew or niece. For disciples of the speaker’s martial sibling.

SHIXIONG: Older martial brother, used for older disciples or classmates.

SHIJIE: Older martial sister, used for older disciples or classmates.

SHIDI: Younger martial brother, used for younger disciples or classmates.

SHIMEI: Younger martial sister, used for younger disciples or classmates.

SHIZU: In this novel, the teacher of one’s teacher.

SHISHUZU: The shishu of one’s own teacher.

ZHENREN: “Perfected one,” a Daoist spiritual master.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Mandarin Chinese is the official state language of mainland China, and pinyin is the official system of romanization in which it is written. As Mandarin is a tonal language, pinyin uses diacritical marks (e.g., ā, á, ǎ, à) to indicate these tonal inflections. Most words use one of four tones, though some are a neutral tone. Furthermore, regional variance can change the way native Chinese speakers pronounce the same word. For those reasons and more, please consider the guide below a simplified introduction to pronunciation of select character names from *The White Cat's Divine Scratching Post.*

More resources are available at sevenseasdanmei.com

NOTE ON SPELLING

Romanized Mandarin Chinese words with identical spelling in pinyin —and even pronunciation—may well have different meanings. These words are more easily differentiated in written Chinese, which uses logographic characters.

GENERAL CONSONANTS

Some Mandarin Chinese consonants sound very similar, such as z/c/s and zh/ch/sh. Audio samples will provide the best opportunity to learn the difference between them.

X: somewhere between the **sh** in **sh**eep and **s** in **s**ilk

Q: a very aspirated **ch** as in **ch**arm

C: **ts** as in pan**ts**

Z: **z** as in **z**oom

S: **s** as in **s**ilk

CH: **ch** as in **ch**arm

ZH: **dg** as in do**dg**e

SH: **sh** as in **sh**ave

G: hard **g** as in **g**raphic

GENERAL VOWELS

The pronunciation of a vowel may depend on its preceding consonant. For example, the “i” in “shi” is distinct from the “i” in “di.” Vowel pronunciation may also change depending on where the vowel appears in a word, for example the “i” in “shi” versus the “i” in “ting.” Finally, compound vowels are often—though not always—pronounced as conjoined but separate vowels. You’ll find a few of the trickier compounds below.

IU: as in **ewe**

IE: **ye** as in **ye**s

UO: **war** as in **war**m

GLOSSARY

CULTIVATION: A central element of the xianxia genre, cultivation is the pursuit of immortality through refining one's spiritual and martial ability. Cultivation in fiction is inspired by both Daoist and Buddhist tradition and cultivators are often explicitly Daoist or Buddhist. In *The White Cat's Divine Scratching Post*, the orthodox cultivation world includes both Daoist and Buddhist sects, while unorthodox cultivators who do not follow any such rules are known as demonic cultivators. Animals can use cultivation to gain human form over time, like the spirit beasts and soul beasts in this novel.

CULTIVATION STAGES: Cultivators usually progress through distinct stages as they grow more powerful. From lowest to highest, these are qi-refining, foundation establishment, core formation, nascent soul, and soul transformation, with the final stage being ascension to heaven. When a cultivator progresses from one stage to the next, they undergo a heavenly tribulation.

DANTIAN: The place in the body where qi is concentrated and refined, and where a cultivator forms their core. Physically, the dantian is located in the lower abdomen.

DUAL CULTIVATION: A cultivation technique involving sex between participants that is meant to improve cultivation prowess. The term also be used as a simple euphemism for sex.

FOUR DIVINE BEASTS: Also known as the Four Guardians or Four Symbols, these mythological creatures each represent one of the cardinal directions: the Black Tortoise of the North (usually depicted as a snake twined around a tortoise, or a tortoise-snake hybrid), the Azure Dragon of the East, the Vermilion Bird of the South, and the White Tiger of the West.

JADE: Jade is a culturally and spiritually important mineral in China. Its durability, beauty, and the ease with which it can be utilized for crafting decorative and functional pieces alike has made it widely beloved since ancient times. The word might evoke green jade (the mineral jadeite), but Chinese texts are often referring to white jade (the mineral nephrite), as when a person's skin is described as "the color of jade."

SPELL ARRAY: A magic circle created by inscribing words or symbols on an object to create a lasting effect.

About the Author

Lv Ye Qian He is a signed writer with Jinjiang Literature City, a member of the China Writers Association, a council member of the Internet Writers Association of Henan, and vice-chair of the Internet Writers Association of Zhengzhou. She's been writing online fiction for fifteen years, specializing in cute and feel-good stories. Her notable works include *The Wife Comes First* and *Mr.* Dior. Her works are popular both in China and abroad, and many have already been adapted into TV dramas, animated series, comics, and radio dramas.

Footnotes

Chapter 47: Inner Demons

[1] From Laozi's Tao Te Ching.

Chapter 50: Taishi

[2] The "raise the clouds" part of this poem is written as "yunqi" in Chinese. The latter part of the poem, "do not add to the desolation," is pronounced the same way as Mo Tianliao's name, although the "tian" in this phrase (添) is a different character than the one in his name (天).

[3] From the Book of Liezi.

Chapter 67: Grand Summit

[4] The first two lines here are quoted from Tao Yao, a well-known verse from the Classic of Poetry. The second two lines are just for Qingtong.

Chapter 70: Champion

[5] "Frog in a well" is a metaphor for a narrow-minded individual who allows their own ignorance to restrict their worldview.

Chapter 84: Disciple Swap

[6] Shishizu is a term for the shishu of one's own master—one's martial granduncle, as it were.

The Cat's Out of the Bag

Knowing that his beautiful cultivation master, Qingtong, is actually the spirit cat he pampered in his previous life, Mo Tianliao wants to get back to doting on his precious kitty! Oh, to be brushing his lovely hair, feeding him delicious treats, spoiling him all over again, and maybe even…a kiss or two? No? Claws to the face instead? Well, that's fine. After all, the most essential thing is healing the damage to Qingtong's divine soul, and that won't be as simple as providing tender loving care.

To help his master, Mo Tianliao needs an elixir made from the rare Jadefruit, which only grows on a single tree. A tree that just so happens to be the property of a rival cultivation sect, one that views spirit beasts like Qingtong as valuable commodities to be bought and sold.

With his unmatched mastery of artifacts and arrays, Mo Tianliao may be able to steal the priceless fruit with his skills alone. But, as they infiltrate the Liuyun Sect, he and Qingtong risk revealing their own sect's greatest secret: that all its highest-ranked cultivators are actually spirit beasts in human form!

耽美Danmei
Seven Seas Entertainment
sevenseasdanmei.com

晋江文学城
WWW.JJWXC.NET

Thank you for reading!

Get the latest news about your favorite Seven Seas books and brand-new licenses delivered to your inbox every week:

Sign up for our newsletter!

Or visit us online:

gomanga.com/newsletter